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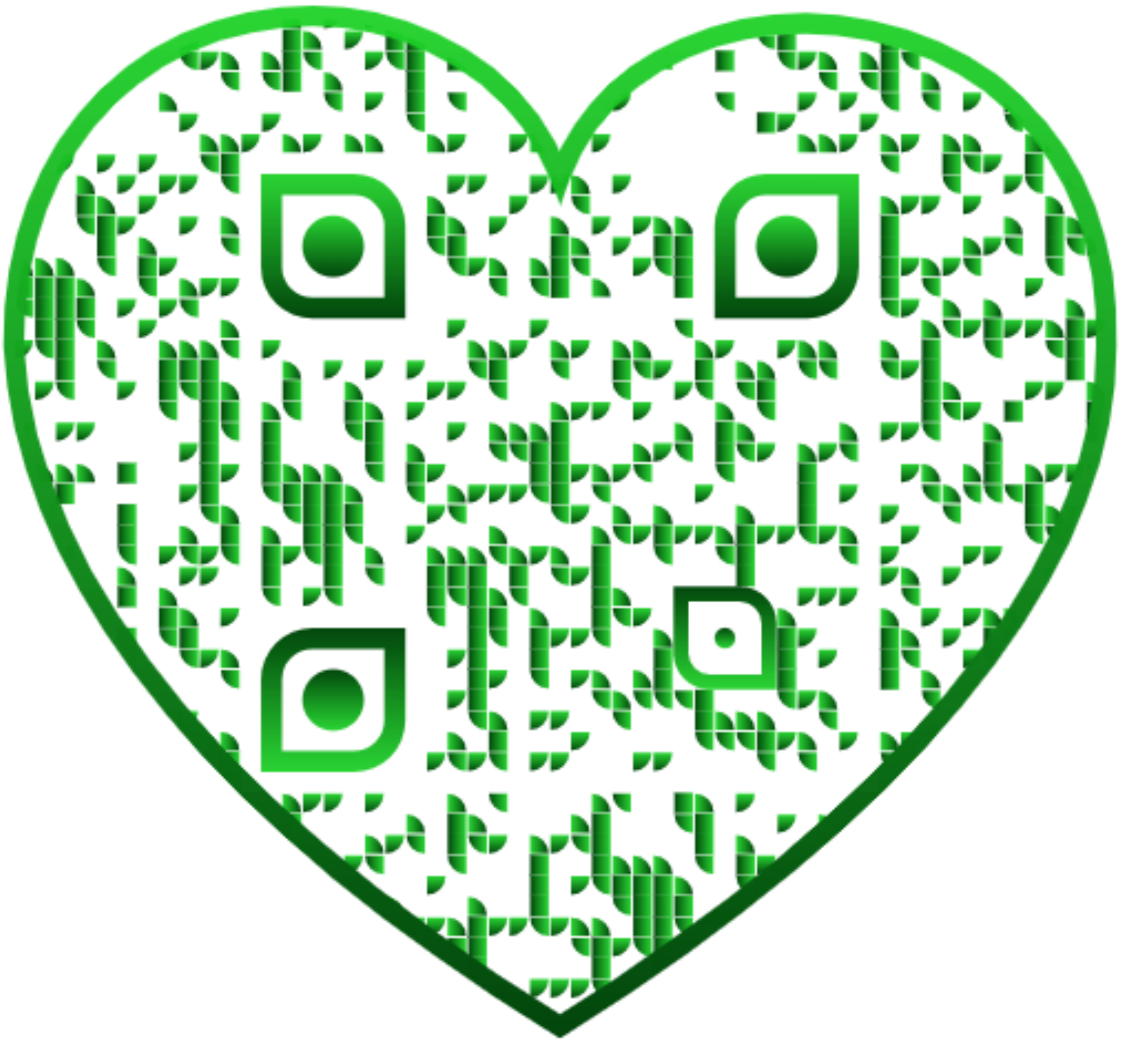

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The life of Brian

If you posses even a passing interest in popular music, you'll recognise the guitar on the front of this month's magazine instantly. In combination with the amplifier on which it rests and the treble booster that sits in between guitar and amp in the signal chain, it's a rig that has been heard by, quite literally, billions of human beings. Turn on the radio and scan through the channels – there's probably a station near you broadcasting its unmistakeable tones right now. And even if you are somehow brushing the dust off the crumbling pages of this magazine and reading it many centuries from now in a barren dystopian future, we *still* think you'll have heard *Bohemian Rhapsody*.

In all seriousness, it's hard to think of another single instrument that's been on more hits and reached more ears than Brian May's Red Special. Paul McCartney's Violin Bass, perhaps? There can't be many other contenders. The story of the guitar that May built with his father has been well told in the past, but this month, we turn our attention to his amps. In a G&B exclusive, Simon Bradley, the man who literally wrote the book on the Red Special with Brian, gets the rundown on May's Vox AC30-driven backline from the guitar and amp techs that keep his rig running smoothly under pressure. It's a fascinating read, so turn to page 16 and you'll see that it's not simply a kind of magic or a miracle that keeps his amps playing the game – the show must go on and it's a crazy little thing called love that stops another AC30 biting the dust. See you next month!

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Turn to **page 28** to take advantage of this month's special *Guitar & Bass* subscription offer.

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MEET THE EXPERTS...

HUW PRICE

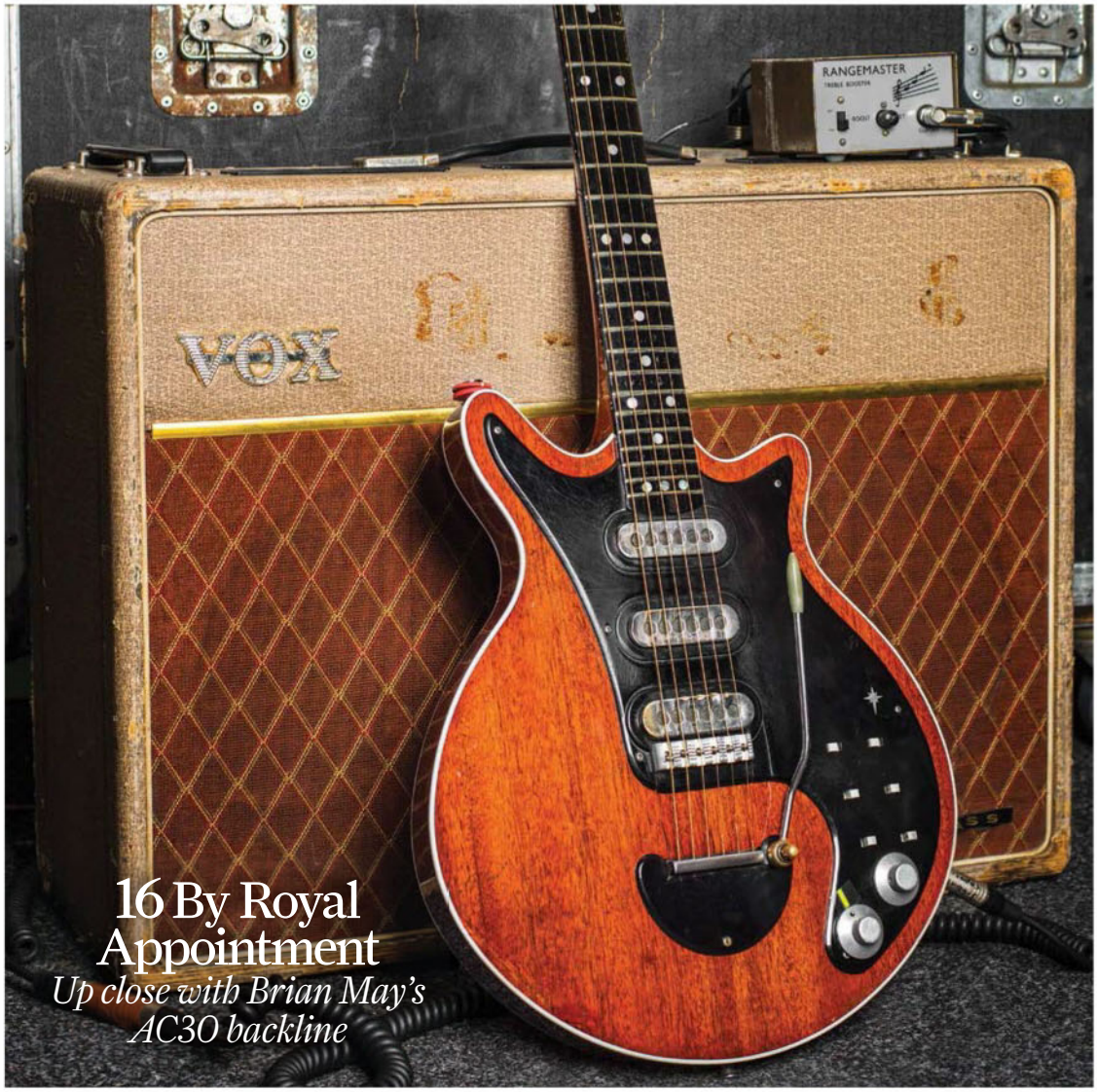
Our senior product specialist spent 16 years as a pro audio engineer working with the likes of David Bowie, Primal Scream and NIck Cave. His book *Recording Guitar & Bass* was published in 2002. He also builds and maintains guitars, amps and FX.

DAVE HUNTER

Dave Hunter is a writer and musician who has worked in the US and the UK. A former editor of this title, he is the author of *The Guitar Amp Handbook*, *Guitar Effects Pedals*, *Amped* and *The Fender Telecaster*. Check out his column on page 8.

RICHARD PURVIS

A reformed drummer, Richard has been gigging for over 20 years as a guitarist and bassist, and working as a music journalist for almost as long. He also composes music for television, and is legally married to his 1966 Gibson Melody Maker.



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Opening bars...

Emerging talent on *G&B*'s radar and a chance to win a Larrivée acoustic

ONES TO WATCH

Old school pals with old-school sound

TAX THE HEAT

A shared appreciation of good, old-fashioned rhythm and blues and classic rock music paved the way for Tax The Heat's foundation by a pair of reunited former school friends... and just four years later, the Wiltshire band find themselves impressing those same musical heroes who inspired their formation.

Vocalist and lead guitarist Alex Veale and drummer Jack Taylor were classmates before a chance meeting later in life brought them back together. They made up for lost time, bonding over their love of bands such as Aerosmith, AC/DC and Thin Lizzy, before recruiting guitarist JP Jacyshyn and bassist Antonio Angotti. Now the admiration appears to be mutual, with former Lizzy guitarist Scott Gorham recently describing Tax The Heat as his "favourite new band".

"It's unbelievable," exclaims Veale. "People like Scott, you've listened to those bands since being a kid. When you first hear *Jailbreak* as a kid, you never think you'll have a connection to those guys, so when it does happen, it's magic.

"We've crammed a lot in, and that was always the idea. We've played in bands for years and for this, I wanted everything we did to have a real purpose, to achieve things and not waste any time. I don't take it for granted, we work our arses off. "A lot of the bands we like dip their feet in that bluesy pool. When we first started, we were trying to approach it from a 60s R&B direction, but then we started letting other influences through and becoming our own band. There's the desert-rock thing where you can still hear a bluesy undertone there, it's similar here – it's not all-out blues, but we're not afraid of getting into those roots, either.

"The first thing that made me want to play was seeing *Wayne's World II* as a kid, and Aerosmith are in it. I was blown away by them and became addicted. Joe Perry was a big one for me, and then AC/DC. They were the first heroes who made me want to play. JP is really into the Allman Brothers and lots of slide guitar, Lowell George from Little Feat... we've got a real mixture of things."

Tours with Gorham's Black Star Riders, Thunder, Europe and Reef have seen the band hone their live act, and further shows with Terrorvision and Ash, as well as some festival slots, are booked for this year. Sharing stages with those esteemed bands has been a valuable learning experience.

"The biggest thing I noticed from doing tours with people like Black Star Riders is how people deal with things and maintain that professional approach. They're so on it; they could be having a bad day, but on stage, you'd never know – they're on it. The other thing we've learned is to enjoy every one of those moments. Tour by tour, you're getting ever-tighter and learning all these things subconsciously. It's so important, the way the music industy is changing, to be a great live band."

The band's debut album, *Fed To The Lions*, produced by Evansson (Robert Plant, Siouxsie Sioux, Goldfrapp) is an uproarious mix of rhythmn and blues, classic rock and furious slide playing that wears its influences on its sleeve, and the band are delighted with the end result.

"Evansson's a very interesting and quirky character," says Veale. "It was a great environment for us to set up and track in the room together live. There are no click tracks and we could have the amps in other rooms and crank them. We took the old-school approach to recording live, but the modern technology of a real big desk with loads of microphones – but no overdubs, trying to make it sound as big and exciting as we could.

"Evansson really brought it together. We didn't rush anything and took our time, and it's definitely the album we wanted to make." **GW**

TRY IF YOU LIKE *Aerosmith, QOTSA*

GEAR *Tax The Heat*

- **GUITARS** Gibson Les Paul Standard, Fender Telecaster Custom
- **PEDALS** Jim Dunlop Joe Bonamassa Signature Fuzz Face, Ibanez TS9DX Tube Screamer, Earthquaker Devices Bit Commander, Earthquaker Devices Grand Orbiter, Boss DD-3, Boss TR-2, Mesa-Boogie overdrive/distortion, Toyroom Effects overdrive
- **AMPLIFIERS** Fender Supersonic, Vox AC30

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The P-03Z is part of Larrivée's new Special Edition series. Made from zebrano, an olive-coloured timber with dark-brown grain lines, with a solid Canadian sitka-spruce top, this attractive parlor-sized acoustic is just 13 inches wide, with a scale length of 24 inches. *G&B*'s reviewer was suitably impressed, giving the P-03Z a rating of 9/10 and noting: "The P-03Z squeezes as much sound as possible out of its 24-inch scale. It's a fine recording and sofa guitar. There's a Larrivée parlor on the International Space Station; good choice". For your chance to win this beautiful guitar, visit **guitar-bass.net/comps/larrivee** and correctly answer the question below.

Q From which wood is the Larrivée P-03Z constructed?

A Zebrano
B Peruvian walnut
C Swamp ash

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Letters from America

George Alessandro's amps are hand-built creations of the highest pedigree. **DAVE HUNTER** finds out if the Crossbred Mutt is best in show

DAVE HUNTER
Dave Hunter is a writer and musician who has worked in the US and the UK. A former editor of this title, he is the author of numerous books including *The Guitar Amp Handbook*, *Guitar Effects Pedals*, *Amped* and *The Fender Telecaster*.

The first time I encountered George Alessandro and his impressive, esoteric amplifiers I was attending the 1999 Winter NAMM show as an emissary of this very magazine (which was titled *The Guitar Magazine* at the time). The unusual hardwood cabs and small-batch aesthetics drew me to his booth, and I spent some time playing a couple of his small- to mid-sized models – a Beagle, I believe, and maybe an English Coonhound. They were interesting for their use of octal preamp tubes, and sounded superb. I went away impressed.

Later, back at the office, we marvelled at some of the options that Alessandro offered in the catalogue I'd taken away with me. Not only were expensive audiophile Black Gate filter capacitors on the list, alongside AudioQuest Functionally Perfect Silver wire, but you could have your amp built with a solid silver chassis and, yes, even solid 24k gold, if you were willing to pay the price. Well, it doesn't hurt to offer, right?

These amp models and more remain on what Alessandro calls his High-End range, but these days, this Maryland-based maker is also catering for the hard-working guitarist with his Working Dog line. Billed as "hand-built, boutique-quality amps at affordable prices", they are all that and more on the strength of the Crossbred Mutt that George sent to us recently. It's a lot of amp for the money, and an impressive piece from any angle.

The Crossbred Mutt is an extremely straight-up amp, which is to say it doesn't have the bells and whistles that attract some players seeking contemporary high-end valve amps. And that's exactly the intention. This thing has been designed and built as a robust and uncompromising platform, with the aim of sounding great at any setting – and requiring no fuss to get there. When asked of his inspirations, George told me: "It is entirely my own design, but sonically inspired and designed to fill the needs of vintage blackface and tweed Fenders, Marshalls and Voxes – and also Trainwrecks, which are basically Vox and Marshall again. It was to be a grab-and-go, versatile amp for working musicians, but ended up exceeding my expectations."

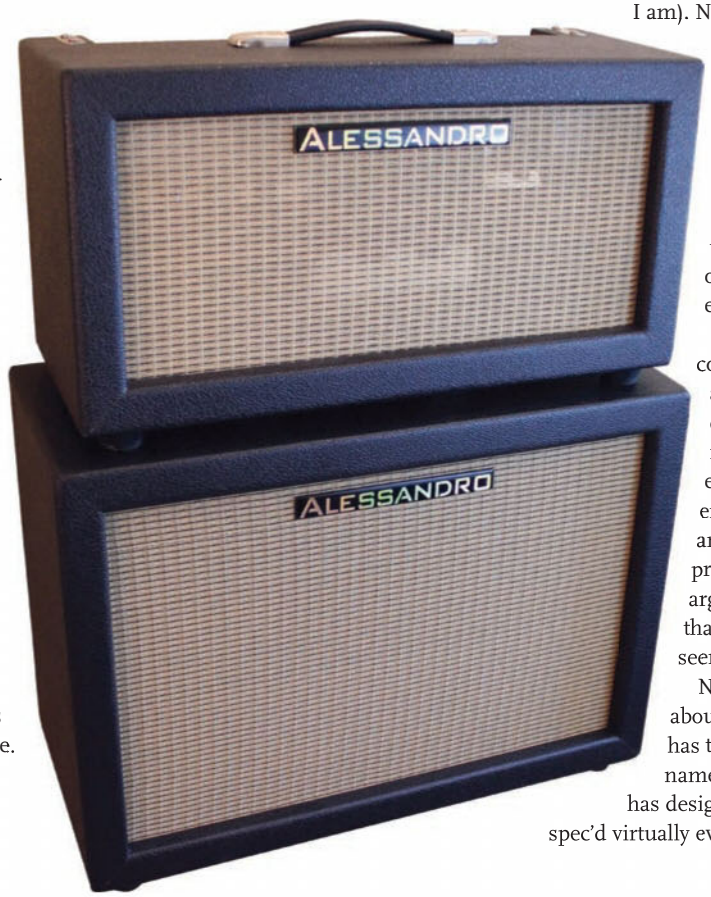
The components are arguably of a higher order than in any other amp I've seen at this level

The controls are simple: volume, reverb, treble, middle, bass and final output power (a voltage-reduction control rather than master volume), and there's a jangly/creamy switch to re-voice it all at the front end. Approximately 40 watts of power comes from a pair of 6L6s in fixed-bias Class AB1, while two 12AX7s and a 12AT7 drive the preamp, reverb and phase inverter. Rectification comes from solid-state diodes.

A look inside the chassis shows you right away, however, that this is much more than just "a simple amp". First off, the workmanship inside this thing is utterly breathtaking (well, if you're into that kind of thing, anyway, as I am). Not only is the wiring and board layout extremely tidy, but there's a certain robustness and artfulness to it that really pops on first-hand examination.

Secondly, the components are all of the highest order one could reasonably expect to encounter in an amp at this price point, and arguably higher than any other I've seen at this level.

Notice how just about everything has the Alessandro name on it? George has designed and/or spec'd virtually every component



KEY FEATURES

Alessandro Crossbred Mutt head and speaker cabinet

- **PRICE** Head $2,400 direct; cab $850 (approx. £1,661 and £588 respectively, excluding shipping and duties)
- **CONTROLS** Volume, reverb, treble, middle, bass, final output power; jangly/creamy switch
- **OUTPUT** 40 watts
- **TUBES** 2x 12AX7s, 1x 12AT7, 2x 6L6s; solid-state rectification
- **FEATURES** Dual speaker outs with switch for 4/8/16 ohms
- **SPEAKER CAB** Open-back 1x12" cabinet with Alessandro-designed AHEP Neo speaker (manufactured by Eminence)
- **WEIGHT** Head 12.7kg/28lbs, cab 9.9kg/22lbs
- **CONTACT** alessandro-products.com, hounddogcorp@msn.com

The chassis is made from non-magnetic stainless steel, with silver-plated wiring

The familiar control panel hides the exceptional workmanship inside

The capacitors and valves used in the head are of a consistently high standard

The AHEP Neo speaker is made exclusively for Alessandro's amps

in here. His coupling capacitors are chunky axial foil/mylar types of the highest possible quality (with looks reminiscent of yellow Astrons from Fenders of the 50s); the filter caps are elite-looking units made to his specs by Mundorf in Germany; the pots are large, sealed creations from Precision Electronics Corporation (PEC) in Canada, but made to Alessandro's specified audio taper and rotation torque; the chassis and hardware are all non-magnetic stainless steel; the wiring is silver-plated and connected with eutectic solder; the power and output transformers are US-made parts of his own design; the circuit board is a sturdy epoxy-glass laminate made to beyond-military spec; and the cabinetry is all carried out in-house.

The Crossbred Mutt's reverb circuit is a small wonder in and of itself. High-quality parts and a good transformer aside, it uses just a single 12AT7 and a relatively short spring pan. As we'll hear, though, the results in no way represent a compromise.

The lightweight, easy-carry speaker cab contains another Alessandro-spec creation in the form of its AHEP Neo 12-inch speaker. Manufactured exclusively for his amps by Eminence Speakers in Kentucky, the Alessandro AHEP Neo is intended to shed the reputation that many speakers made with this efficient rare-earth magnet have earned for a cold, brittle response, presenting classic vintage-speaker warmth and responsiveness in a delightfully back-friendly package. The cab itself is an open-backed construction and is designed for superior resonance and sound dispersion. It probably won't hurt that the Alessandro Amp Three speaker cable (Ohno Cast Copper, patented geometry and $249 for a one-foot length, rising to an eye-watering $716.50 for six feet – not ordinarily included in the price of the amp) was thrown in to connect the head to the cab.

Tested with a Gibson 1959 Les Paul Reissue, a refin'd '57 Telecaster and a Strat-like Lentz JR Reserve S, the Crossbred Mutt acquitted itself astoundingly well at every turn. Initially going easy, with the final output control up to maximum and the volume at a reasonable nine o'clock or so, this amp issued one of the sweetest, most toothsome clean tones I've heard in a long time. It is 'big blackface' for sure, but possibly with a little more juiciness around the note, and a textured depth that lends a lot of dimension to its impressive clarity. With the S-type and the Tele, the tone has classic Fender written all over it, but, as George says, hints at other, more esoteric leanings that enable an easy escape from that kind of pigeonholing. Through all of this, the jangly/creamy switch does what it says on the tin, making it a superbly handy flick-of-a-switch aural reconfigurator.

The reverb dials in evenly and with some admirable restraint, rather than going from too faint to too splashy in the rotation of half a digit. Up a little past noon (somewhere you never go on 60s reverb amps if you're not looking to surf), it's in its most lush and atmospheric sweet spot, but it goes further still without diffusing your core tone beyond recognition, and sounding just fabulous all the while.

The Les Paul brings out the high-performance nature of the amp more quickly at these relatively tame settings; with the volume up past halfway, though, and the power reduced accordingly, the Crossbred Mutt really begins to sing.

There's girth aplenty here, and a creamy, tactile lead voice when you hit it hard, yet still a surprisingly robust clarity, and the ability to roar away without folding to low-end mud or midrange mush. At this point, I'm reminded of Alessandro's "and also Trainwrecks" comment regarding his design aspirations: the Crossbred Mutt might be a deceptively austere amp, but so were Ken Fischer's creations. Like those, the apparent simplicity becomes a real boon when you crank up and go at it, guitar-into-jack – where the dynamics, tonal integrity and harmonic complexity of the amp really shine, revealing what a powerful performance tool a 'no frills' amp can be, when it's built right. Now... how good must his current High-End amps sound?

READER BOARDS

Versatility is the name of the game for Zuma guitarist **MARCO FORMENTINI**'s rig. He tells us why that means keeping it simple

KIT LIST

Marco Formentini

- **PEDALS** Fredric Effects buffer, TC Electronic Spark Mini, TC Electronic PolyTune 2 Mini, Budda Budwah, Fredric Effects Golden Eagle, MXR Custom Badass Modified OD, Suhr Riot, Xotic Effects AC Booster, MXR Phase 90, Dunlop Jimi Hendrix Uni-Vibe, TC Electronic Flashback X4
- **PATCH CABLES** Klotz, MXR and Planet Waves
- **POWER SUPPLY** T-Rex Fuel Tank Chameleon
- **BOARD TYPE** Pedaltrain 2
- **HEAR IT HERE** facebook.com/zumarockband

What inspired this setup?

"The main inspiration behind this setup is flexibility, mixed with simplicity! Playing with Zuma, a rock covers band spanning from The Who and The Beatles to Green Day and Blink-182, I needed the right pedals to recreate a wide array of sounds. Therefore, I am using three different dirt pedals to have low-, medium- and high-gain tones. It's very simple and easy to set up, especially when I'm playing in small pubs in the Bristol area!"

Tell us a little about the journey...

"The journey leading to this board was quite simple: I tried to find the right sounds, trying different pedals... my favourite day off is in Tin Pan Alley! There are two pedals I really like: the MXR Custom Badass, which is my main overdrive pedal, and the Suhr Riot, which initially I sold when I was living in London. When I moved to Bath and started playing again I had to buy a new one, this time orange! Of course, I am still searching for new ways to improve the board; for example, I recently added the Fredric Effects buffer, which is great and really useful to improve the tone."

Is there another pedal that you are looking to add?

"Strymon pedals are intriguing, especially the Mobius and the TimeLine. These two could be future pedals on the upper part of my board for delays and modulations. I would also like to try a more realistic rotary speaker pedal – at the moment I am using the Dunlop Uni-Vibe."

What guitars and amps do you use with this board?

"My main guitar is a 2001 Gibson SG I bought in Dublin, an amazing guitar! I also use a Fender '50s Road Worn Strat for brighter sounds. The amp is a Vox AC15 with a Greenback speaker, simple and effective. I use the Top Boost channel, set very clean, and all the overdriven tones come from the pedals."

What lessons have you learned along the way?

"Keep it simple! The way I am using this setup is to maximise simplicity, but in the past I was using a more complex setup, with channel-switching amps, effects loops, etc. Now it's not feasible anymore. I am really happy with this rig and looking forward to having fun rocking in the south west with Zuma!"

SHOW US YOUR BOARD

To be in with a chance of seeing your pedalboard in the mag, email the details and an image to **guitarandbass@anthem-publishing.com**

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TEST PILOTS PRS S2 VELA

We recently gave three lucky *G&B* readers the chance to be custodians of PRS instruments for a whole year and report back with their findings. A busy guitarist in two duos and a Manic Street Preachers tribute act, Welsh native **JARRAD OWENS** gives us his first impressions of the S2 Vela...

Jarrad Owens

- **TEST INSTRUMENT** PRS S2 Vela (McCarty Tobacco Sunburst)
- **BANDS** Maniac Street Preachers, Supernova (electric duo), Acoustix (acoustic duo)
- **MAIN PEDALS & AMPS USED** Peavey ValveKing 112, Peavey 6505 Plus 112, Randall RD5 (Maniac Street Preachers amps, dependent on venue), Line 6 Amplifi FX100 (Supernova)
- **SESSIONS SO FAR** Supernova rehearsals and first gig

The courier had delivered; there it was, the brown shipping box that contained my PRS S2 Vela. I carefully opened the box and lifted the thick padded gigbag from its packaging and was greeted with Paul's signature in white stitching – a nice touch and a step up, at least aesthetically, from the wine-red equivalent that accompanied my SE Zach Myers. Inside lived what can only be described as 'sensational' – a quirky mixture of traditional PRS design and unquestionable vintage vibe. Taking a moment to absorb its beauty, I was reminded of the Tobacco Burst of the 50s Les Paul Junior, a vintage workhorse and favourite of mine. It's easy to see why the colour namechecks Mr McCarty.

The famous PRS setup was evident, each string a hair's breadth away from the frets, and it even arrived in tune. Each fret is rolled at the edges and the neck profile is comfortable and familiar. On the surface, the hardware is uncharacteristically retro for a PRS – the bridge a brass-saddle affair, à la Leo Fender; the bridge humbucker, as seen on the Starla, with a hint of TV Jones; and the Type-D neck pickup aesthetically reminiscent of the DeArmonds on golden-era Gretsch guitars. It seems to be an amalgamation of Paul's favourite 50s appointments – part Fender, part Gretsch, Gibson-flavoured tonewoods and finish, all put together with Paul's signature attention to detail and innovation.

The Vela's tonal palette is remarkably broad, the bridge humbucker delivering a great deal of definition in a clean setting

In order to hear the guitar in its most raw form, I chose to plug it into a 1949 Fender Deluxe, an amplifier harking back to the beginning of the era that clearly inspired this guitar. The Vela's tonal palette is remarkably broad, the bridge humbucker delivering a great deal of definition in a clean setting, very similar to a '63 Gretsch Duo Jet I used to own. Give it some dirt and the bridge humbucker positively barks, and the high-fidelity response inspired me to play some Malcolm Young-style rhythm parts.

Upon splitting, the bridge pickup has a country twang, the quack of a Tele with a touch more breadth – fantastic for country picking and jangly 60s rock, perhaps best described as a 'RickenTele' tone? The neck pickup yields a warm, plummy jazz tone with a clean amp and the tone control rolled of a touch; when you crank the amp and roll up the tone the Vela really sings, with warm, sustaining notes that would have made Gary Moore weep.

As a dyed-in-the-wool guitar geek who's played a bit of everything over the years, it takes a lot to truly bowl me over – but on first impressions, it seems like the Vela has succeeded. Its next challenge is to emulate James Dean Bradfield's own PRS Vela in the hands of Rich, our JDB in Maniac Street Preachers, during festival season – I'm looking forward to finding out what he thinks of it.

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By Royal Appointment

Granted exclusive access to Brian May's stunning collection of Vox AC30s, *G&B* goes where no guitar mag has been before to find out what it takes to keep Brian's amps operational on the road, why they're now more reliable than ever and just why the Queen guitarist will never use anything else...

Story **Simon Bradley** | Photography **Eleanor Jane**

The Vox AC30 Twin, introduced in the spring of 1960, has its unmistakable tone all over the very beginnings of guitar-based popular music, and some of the greatest English bands ever have plied their trade through this most revered of combination amplifiers.

A band utterly synonymous with Vox are, of course, The Beatles, and the documentation of John Lennon's first purchase of a Vox amp – an AC15 Twin bought on 27 July 1962 from Hessy's Music in Liverpool – still exists. By early 1963, the band were well on their way to becoming the biggest band of all time and both Lennon and George Harrison had moved on to the classic black/brown AC30, with amps provided by Vox after manager Brian Epstein had reached an agreement with the Brit amp manufacturer. Paul McCartney also used an AC30 for a few shows around that time, albeit the head version called the Super Twin, fed into his trusty T-60 2x15 cabinet.

Rolling Stones guitarists Keith Richards and Brian Jones also used AC30s for a time after bassist Bill Wyman introduced them to his own Vox amp, as did both the Clapton and Beck incarnations of The Yardbirds; needless to say, the list goes on and on.

The Beatles, the Stones and Jeff Beck were just some of the heroes an unassuming student named Brian Harold May looked up to. With assistance from his father, he'd spent 18 months building an electric guitar from scratch, one that would become known the world over as the Red Special. For amplification purposes, he had graduated to a Burns Orbit combo after years spent at home noodling through a Collaro tape deck's preamp he'd plugged into a homemade radio.

May and his bands, first 1984 then Smile, were fitting in as many gigs around their academic studies as they could, but the young guitarist was growing concerned that he'd never achieve the sounds he had in his head.

No stranger to the venues of the capital, Brian went to London's Marquee Club one night, as he often did, little knowing that his quest for just the right tone was coming to an end.

"Hendrix was all about the guitar and the amplifier, and it had that sort of wonderfully smooth, almost orchestral distortion," Brian told this writer in 2013. "I wondered how you did that, and the answer was actually given to me by Rory Gallagher. I used to go and see him every Thursday night at the Marquee and, after the gig, we'd sneak into the back rooms when everyone was leaving so we'd be able to see him.

"He was the nicest, most patient guy you could imagine. He told me about his guitar and a little box called a Rangemaster treble booster. He showed me his amps and said that he used the Vox amps because '...they just speak'.

"A bunch of us went down Tottenham Court Road to a second-hand amp shop called, I think, Take 5, and they had a few Vox AC30s, beaten up and all in a row.

"I plugged my Red Special and a Rangemaster that I'd found into one of these amps and the sound was just there. It had that depth, the overtones, the sustain, and the throaty splutter. I just knew that it was the sound I'd always been looking for, so we bought two at £25 each, took them home and that was it."

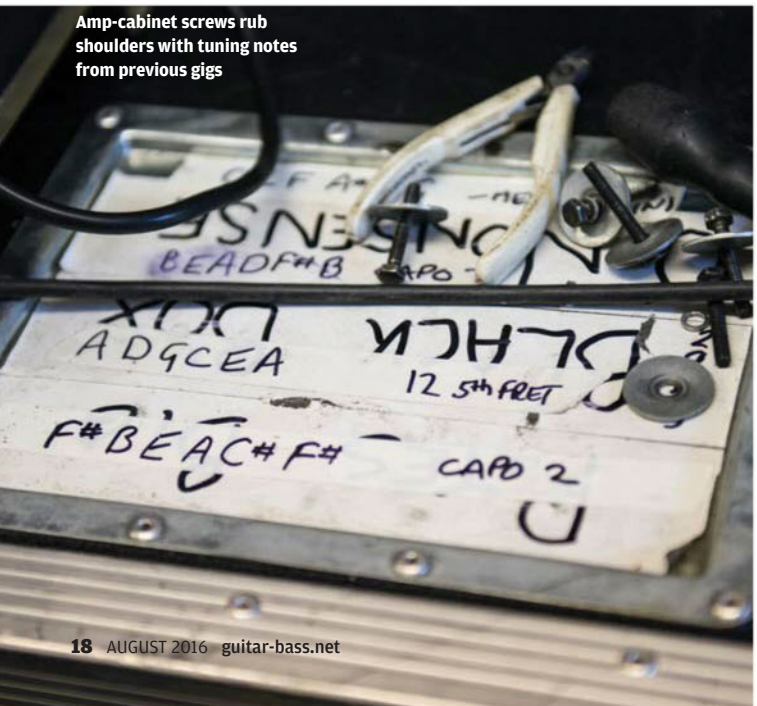
So, is Brian May the most prominent exponent of the AC30 in music history? >

One of numerous road cases that have been around the world with Brian many times

May's pedalboard is operated by Pete Malandrone from the side of the stage

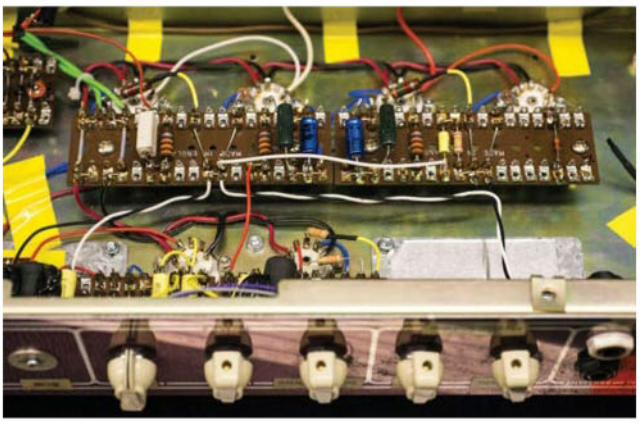
The chassis is eased from an AC30. "I tend to get them serviced more regularly than they need to be," says Malandrone

Each of May's main three AC30s is loaded with Celestion Alnico Blue and G12H Anniversary speakers. "Speakers have the biggest effect on an amplifier," says Mike Hill



Amp-cabinet screws rub shoulders with tuning notes from previous gigs

May has been cranking out classic riffs and solos from his stage-left standpoint since 1970



Well, that's one of those eternally enthralling guitary questions, but we'd suggest he's surely not far off. Put it this way: with numerous irons in the fire, he's about as busy today as he's ever been and, of course, neither The Shadows nor The Beatles are likely to be touring or recording any time soon.

"He's probably sold more amps for Vox than anybody else," suggests Pete Malandrone, May's long-serving guitar tech. "He recently bought a little Marshall valve combo for recording, just for something different, but he never actually used it. He tried Matchless for a while and also had, of all things, a Gallien-Krueger amp that was like a little suitcase [more than likely a GK 250ML – Ed]. But no, I've never really seen him use anything but an AC30."

"It had that depth, the overtones, the sustain and the throaty splutter. I knew it was the sound I'd been looking for"

BRIAN MAY

The current live backline comprises eight AC30s configured as follows: three are angled away from May, with the dry guitar signal running through the centre amp and the wet signal, courtesy of a TC Electronic G-Major 2 and a rackmount Dunlop Cry Baby, fed into the amps sat to its left and right. The trio immediately above them are on standby, ready to replace any of the main amps should they go down, and the final two of the octet are placed just offstage in case of dire emergencies. The top row incorporates three dummy AC30s that carry Malandrone's stockpile of spare speakers, which explains why we actually see nine up there onstage.

It's all go for Team May as full production rehearsals for Queen's Summer Festival tour are imminent and, with Brian holed up in a recording studio somewhere, we've taken the chance to catch up with both Malandrone and engineer Mike Hill, who's preparing to service the amps in readiness for the rigours of the road.

Hill cut his teeth at Marshall Amplification, joining the company in 1970 and, amongst many other achievements, developed the lauded JCM800 2203 head. Since setting up his own business in 1995, he has cultivated an enviable client list. We first ask him to describe exactly what the servicing of an AC30 entails. >

Top left **May's backline for Queen's 2016 Summer Festival tour comprised eight operational AC30s with nine up on stage**
Above left **Mike Hill has been instrumental in keeping May's amps operational for over 10 years**
Top right **Pete Malandrone, May's guitar tech for the past 20 years**
Above right **A detail of one of May's main trio of AC30s, as initially modified by Australian engineer Greg Fryer for the *We Will Rock You* theatre show**

Above **Hill monitors the output of each amp on an oscilloscope. "From experience, I know exactly what to expect," he says**
Top centre **A drift of confetti-cannon foil in the corner of an AC30's cabinet. Every amp on test was similarly embellished**
Top right **Hill removes yet another piece of foil, this time from an amp's EL84 power valves. "They get everywhere," he confirms**
Above centre **The Kikusui PCR1000M power supply. "It's very light and robust, and doesn't seem to go wrong," says Pete**
Above right **A chassis ready for testing. The yellow PAT tester checks for earth continuity, earth leakage and insulation**

"First, we check the earth's on within the chassis and make sure that everything is mechanically solid, because obviously things do become loose over time," he explains. "We remove any stray material before running it through the test gear."

Amongst the stray material discovered in the amps being serviced today are strips of gold foil intrinsic to the confetti cannon finale at show's end last time out.

"When the cannons go off, I turn all the amps off and cross my fingers," says Malandrone wryly as another potentially dangerous handful is retrieved from the recesses of an AC30's chassis.

Hill, nodding sagely, peels yet another strip from the glass of an EL84 before continuing: "We check the fuses, then put in a 1k sine wave and monitor the output that's driven into the correct load so the amp thinks it's driving a speaker. Then we check all the controls and the valves, and ensure that the output level's correct."

"On the last two tours, the best part of 60 gigs in Europe and America, I had just one amp failure"

PETE MALANDRONE

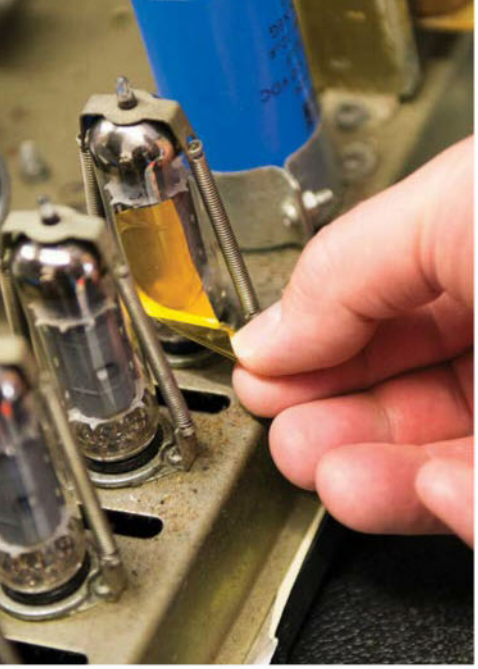
We notice that the servicing didn't seem to take too long, maybe a couple of hours to look over eight amps. A good sign, we assume.

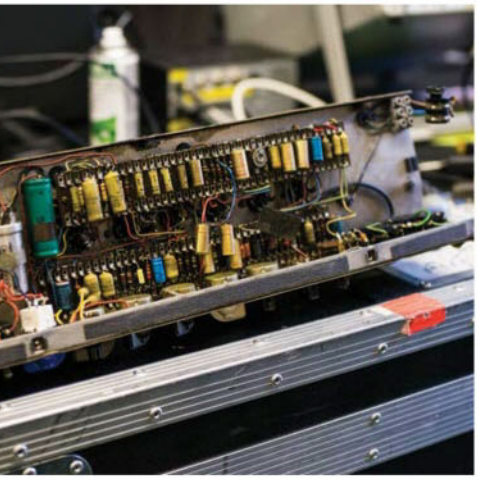
"Well, if everything's okay then there's not really anything else to do other than ensure everything's as it should be," Hill reassures us. "Today, all that needed to be done fundamentally was to change four output valves that had actually worn out, which is amazing, as they normally break well before that stage."

We're quite surprised by this, considering how hard May runs his amps. The panacea for this long life is an unassuming piece of kit that lurks at the bottom of the live rack: a Kikusui PCR1000M power supply designed for the medical industry. Irrespective of where May is in the world, the unit will take the local mains and supply his backline with constant power at a voltage and frequency set by Malandrone. "Every amplifier has an optimum voltage that it requires, and in the case of an AC30 it's 234V AC at 50Hz," says Hill. "That generates all the correct voltages inside and, by giving it exactly what it was designed for, you get a really reliable situation. With these AC30s I've measured the voltages, that's what we got and that's what the power supply is set to."

Malandrone's enamoured and, after telling us how much one of these units costs (clue: a lot!), continues to sing its praises.

"It came along by accident, really," he says. "On the first American Queen + Paul Rodgers tour [in 2006] we used a UPS [Uninterruptible Power Supply – Ed], which is basically a big battery that provides a stable voltage. We had Brian's rig on one UPS and the rest of the backline on another, and I realised after we'd >





got home that we hadn't had too many amps go down, maybe two or three during the entire tour. So, after speaking to people like Mike, I started looking at power supplies and found this. They're expensive but well worth it."

The Kikusui not only increases amp reliability, but also helps keep the sound constant, as Hill explains.

"Because amplifiers have a very basic power supply, the frequency coming in is actually part of the signal, and if you drive the amplifier hard you can actually see it on the oscilloscope," he says. "The power supply ripple, as we call it, is actually superimposed on the signal, and this means that if you play a note on the guitar there is an underlying set of frequencies going on. In the UK, these are multiples of 50Hz, starting off with a fundamental of 100Hz, and they modulate with the notes of the guitar. You can actually hear a 100Hz hum underneath the notes on some recordings from the 70s.

"However, in the States the frequency is at 60Hz, so you >

BOOST IT!

A potted history of Brian's treble boosters, a vital component of his majestic tone

The AC30 doesn't possess a huge level of inherent, ear-pleasing preamp gain or liquid sustain, so May, again taking after Rory Gallagher, employed a treble booster to enhance his amps' performance. He used his original germanium Dallas Rangemaster up until 1976, when he commissioned renowned engineer Pete Cornish to design a new booster. May incorporated various Cornish designs into his rig for the remainder of Queen's recording and touring life, and versions of the cherished TB-83 are still available from Cornish today.

In the 90s May used, first, a Guild booster before moving on in 1998 to units made by Aussie luthier Greg Fryer. There are three incarnations of the Fryer Treble Booster that are available to the public, with May preferring the Touring version, which adds 31dB of signal hike.

Today, May uses a strap-mounted booster made by Nigel Knight at Knight Audio Technologies that has been designed specifically to operate harmoniously with the Sennheiser wireless systems he also uses. Knight offers these units for general sale via www.deacyamp.com, and they come highly recommended.

"A treble booster does drive the power amp valves harder, and if anyone's turned an AC30 up full without one it sounds pretty horrible," advises Pete.

May's original germanium Dallas Rangemaster treble booster, as heard on Queen's early albums

One of the new KAT treble boosters, designed to fit unobtrusively onto a guitar strap

A TASTE OF RORY

How an established guitar hero inspired the making of another

At the dawn of the 70s, Irish guitarist Rory Gallagher was experiencing something of a change in his career. He'd earned a stellar reputation during his time with Taste but, after the band split in 1970, he'd found himself hitting the road as a solo artist. The young Brian May and his friends used to see Gallagher play as often as they could, and May was wholeheartedly smitten with Gallagher's tone. The Irishman performed at London's Marquee on as many as 40 occasions between 1968 and 1971, and it was after one of these gigs that May was able to meet his hero and do what we all love to do: talk gear. Inspired by the conversation, May bought himself a pair of AC30s and immortality beckoned.

"The Vox AC30 is the best all-round European amp I've ever come across," Gallagher told *Guitar Player* magazine in 1978. "The Shadows and The Beatles used them, so you knew it was the popular amp, and I found that when using the treble booster you got a built-in gain. If I used the Normal input, which was very bassy compared to the Brilliant input, I could get that nice rough edge without getting into a very fuzzy sound."

Gallagher used many other amps during his career, including 50-watt Marshall JMP combos, Ampeg AVT40 and VT22 combos, and, most notably, a battered 1954 Fender Bassman, as used on 1974's legendary Irish tour.

May, of course, has never felt the need to look any further than his AC30s. If it ain't broke...

start off at 120Hz, then all the harmonics from 240Hz, 480Hz and so on. So the amp's sound changes, and this is why it's so important to have a fixed frequency for the amp system's power supply."

Each of May's AC30s that see regular use has been modified to include just the Normal channel, which is controlled by a single volume knob. Virtually nothing remains of the other channels, save for some redundant chickenhead knobs, disconnected pots and input sockets.

Everything is point-to-point wired – no PCBs here – and, as can be seen from our pictures, is extremely neat and tidy. Reliability is the name of game, so much so that a solid-state rectifier, custom-made by Hill, has replaced the traditional GZ34 valve in all the amps, following in the footsteps of an operation undertaken on May's amps back in the day by Pete Cornish.

"The first thing a valve does when it goes down is take the valve rectifier out," stresses Malandrone. "The way that we came across the idea of using a transistor GZ34 was that Mike simply made one and asked me to try it. I plugged it in, Brian didn't notice any difference in sound, and that was it. It just adds a little more reliability to the amp, and I'd defy anybody to A/B a GZ34 rectifier valve with one of Mike's and tell the difference."

How about the other tubes? "Valves!" exclaim Hill and Malandrone in tandem, quick to correct our inadvertent slip into Americana.

"There's no absolute rule for the life of a valve," says Hill. "With Brian's amps, we match the valves so each one of a given specification is providing the same amount of bias current, and that's about it. Hopefully, you'll get a situation where, as here, they'll wear out rather than fail."

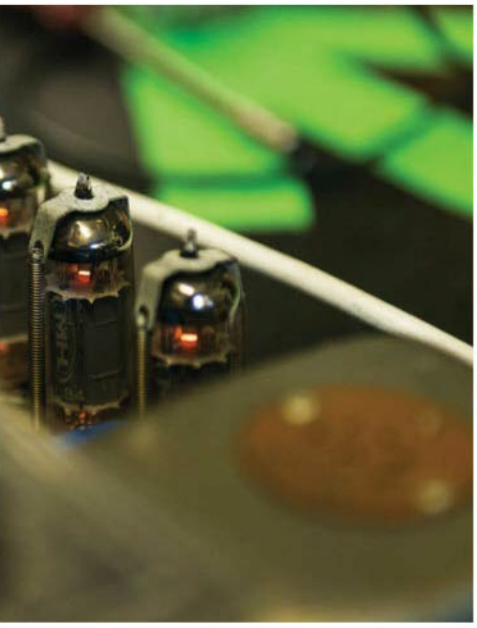
"On the last two tours, which was the best part of 60 gigs in Europe and America, I had just one amp failure," agrees Malandrone. "I did some valve changes along the way because they do go dull, but these days I'm more likely to lose an amp to speaker failure than a valve flashing over."

Talking of speakers, up until very recently there were different combinations in the three main stage AC30s. The centre amp was loaded with a pair of Alnico Blues, while both the left and right AC30s featured a Blue alongside a Celestion G12H Anniversary. Now, with an AC30 modified by Hill in the centre position, all three main AC30s feature a combination of the two speakers.

"What that does is give you a little bit of flexibility and reliability," clarifies Malandrone. "If it's the Blue that's mic'd up and starts to sound a bit woolly, I can run on and move the mic over to the G12H. It's the same gear every day, but Brian might not like how things are sounding because of the room or something, and it can be as simple as moving the mic across to make it sound better for that room."

Among Malandrone's many responsibilities while on the road is ensuring that the gear continues to operate during the continually humungous shows Queen are playing. We ask him to explain just what happens should an amp go down mid-show. He describes, almost nonchalantly, a process that, to us, resembles a Formula 1 pit stop.

"You run onstage, throw the microphone out of the way, unplug the input jack and the power, move that amp out of the way, lift the replacement down, plug it in, take it off standby and put the mic in front of it," he explains. "Then you go and get



another amp and put it back in the middle row." Fortunately, though, this is an increasingly uncommon happenstance.

"I've never gone through more than two in a show and, more recently, I can't remember the last time an amp went down," Malandrone goes on. "When I started with Brian, we'd be looking at an amp failure every couple of shows, and that's down to me not having met the people I work with now. I didn't really know anything about AC30s back then and I've learned things not only from my own observations, but by the process of getting to the bottom of certain problems, too."

Imagine, then, being May's guitar tech during the halcyon days of the 70s and 80s, when technology, not to mention health and safety constraints, weren't anywhere close to the standards of today. At Queen's absolute height, the amp setup was considerably larger and more complex, too, incorporating as many as 12 AC30s, all on and handling different signal feeds.

"With no disrespect to previous employees, I know for a fact Brian used to be constantly worried about the gear," says Malandrone. "When I first started he would always ask me if everything was all right: he never asks me now. It may well have been the case that, back then, they couldn't source decent valves or there weren't people like Mike they could go to for advice or help."

So, does Brian get involved with the gear in any way other than playing through it?

"No, not at all: he has little or no time or inclination now, and that's the way it should be. He just needs to worry about what notes to play," affirms Malandrone. "He leaves it to me and doesn't worry unless he's unhappy with how it sounds. Now, because it's about as constant as we can get it, I can confidentially say to him that, aside from valve and speaker wear, nothing has changed between yesterday and today. Everything is always in exactly the same place and it's always the same."

So, the big question. What would have happened had the young Brian experienced his epiphany not thanks to Rory Gallagher's AC30 but due to his biggest hero of all: Jimi Hendrix?

"I'd imagine that it probably wouldn't have made a massive amount of difference, and if Brian had started using Marshall heads, it probably would have worked just as well," says Pete. "He's so distinctive that he sounds like him whatever he's playing through.

"You know, if he'd managed to get to talk to Hendrix or Clapton instead of Rory, he might have gone a different way, but I'm convinced that we'd probably still be sat in a big house in Surrey talking about it."

For further information on Mike Hill, visit his website at www.mikehillservices.com >

Top left **An EL84 from Hill's own Elite Valve series. Each is hand-selected and checked on a custom test rig**
Above left **The cornerstone of any AC30's classic tone: a quartet of glowing EL84 power valves. Nothing sounds quite like it**
Above **The three main Fryer AC30s, all serviced and ready to go. Each has only one operational control: the volume pot of its Normal channel**

THE SEVEN ACs OF BRI

We pick some notable AC30s from May's personal collection, some that are well loved and others... not so

As befits a guitarist who's been world-famous for over four decades, Brian May's equipment warehouse, managed by Pete Malandrone, is stacked gratifyingly with AC30s, boxes of effects and more guitar cases than we can count. Also dotted around are some iconic pieces of Queen history, including May's original Dallas Rangemaster and the curly guitar lead used on the 1986 *Magic* tour.

"Brian's collection [of AC30s] is such a mish-mash of good ones, reasonable ones, mediocre ones and ones that just sound terrible," observes Malandrone as we set about choosing some amps to fawn over. "I'd guess that Vox used to just send them to him, and some of them are great but others are just unusable!" Here are just seven amps from Brian's stash...

Vox AC30/6 TB

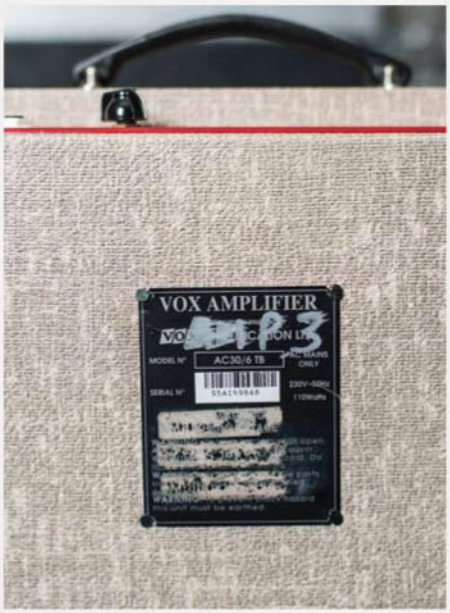
SERIAL NUMBER 93A009702
YEAR OF PRODUCTION 1993/2016

This amp was put together for May by Mike Hill using an early-90s Marshall-era chassis, and has an Alnico Blue and a Celestion G12H30. After strenuous testing during tour rehearsals ("It's the only real way I can evaluate stuff, under battle conditions," says Malandrone) it sits at the centre of the live rig's main amp row and, if you saw Queen during 2016's Summer Festival tour, this is what you heard. "Fundamentally, it's the Normal channel of an AC30," Hill explains. "It has one jack socket and a volume control, and is set with a slight bit of top cut." "Most people know this," says Malandrone, "but, for Brian, every control is off apart from the volume of the Normal channel, which is all the way up. Consequently, I don't need those other controls; they're just other components that can go wrong. All I have to do is turn it up and down. I don't really need to do that; we should have amps with no knobs, really."

Vox AC30 Bass

SERIAL NUMBER 6633B
DATE OF PRODUCTION February 1963

This example, in an elegantly weathered fawn vinyl, is one of Brian's main recording AC30s and is arguably the jewel in the crown of his collection. The alteration of the value of just a handful of capacitors from the standard AC30 schematic gives the bass version a slightly enhanced low-end response and, although never overly popular, it cost 105 guineas upon its introduction in 1961.



Vox AC30/6 TB

SERIAL NUMBER 95A169848 **YEAR OF PRODUCTION** 1995

Modified by Vox guru Dave Petersen, this AC30 features a single channel alongside an in-built treble booster. Although this configuration was sound – and was, to a point, adopted for the signature AC30BM Custom that was released in 2007 – Pete tells us that Brian finds the amp a little too noisy to be used. There are schematics from reputable online sources that allow an experienced engineer to convert an AC30 to this specification, and they make fascinating reading. However, we stress that such an undertaking should not be attempted by the inexperienced, as serious injury – or worse – lies in wait.

Vox AC30/6 TB

SERIAL NUMBER N/A **YEAR OF PRODUCTION** 1995

Until very recently, this AC30 formed the heart of May's live rig, residing at the centre of the main three-amp setup until Queen's 2016 tour. The Marshall-era chassis can be dated to late 1995/early 1996 but, after years of tweaking and refinements by various engineers, not least Australian technician and luthier Greg Fryer, nothing of the original parts, save the amp chassis and cabinet, remains. It's loaded with a pair of Alnico Blue speakers (see main text) and, at full volume, has a wonderfully rich and warm tone.

Vox AC30TBX Purple

SERIAL NUMBER 95A079712
YEAR OF PRODUCTION 1996

Originally part of a three-amp series of limited editions introduced by Vox during 1995 and 1996, the purple version followed in the footsteps of an eye-catching incarnation in red, as well as a reissue of an AC30 in fawn vinyl. This particular amp is used occasionally for recording and video shoots, and was a gift to May from Vox. A limited series of purple and cream amps, comprising an AC30C2, AC15C1 and AX4C1, was introduced in 2013.

Vox AC30/6 TB Red

SERIAL NUMBER 95A154140
YEAR OF PRODUCTION 1995

Another example of an amp with a limited-edition finish, this time red vinyl. The details of this incarnation's lineage seem somewhat muddled, but it's likely that it's just one of 100 or so produced by Vox at the end of 1995. Brian has also used the amp for occasional video shoots. Custom colours are nothing new for Vox, with some AC30s from the 1960s also boasting red, as well as dark blue, finishes.

Vox AC30TB Collector's Edition

SERIAL NUMBER 001 **YEAR OF PRODUCTION** 1991

This unashamedly luxurious limited edition features an oiled African mahogany cabinet and brass fittings. It was handbuilt in the UK and came loaded with a pair of Vox speakers manufactured at Rose Morris' Precision Electronics plant in Wellingborough. It weighs significantly more than an AC30 of a more mundane spec, but sounds almost as good as it looks – and Brian's example is, as we'd expect, serial number 001.

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"I don't want comfort in my rock 'n' roll"

How do you follow a widescreen double album full of stadium-sized choruses? Biffy Clyro frontman Simon Neil tells *G&B* how working with acclaimed producer Rich Costey shook things up during the sessions for the Scottish rockers' seventh album, *Ellipsis*

Story **Chris Vinnicombe**

From early tours during which the band's pulverising dynamics regularly caused the pint glasses of unsuspecting punters to slip from their grasps and shatter on sticky nightclub floor tiles, through to triumphant festival headline sets, Biffy Clyro have always possessed a capricious streak. And while the Ayrshire trio are still capable of more twists and turns in the course of one song than most bands manage in a career, when lead singer, guitarist and principal songwriter Simon Neil returned home from two years on the road in support of 2013's mammoth double album, *Opposites*, his creative well was alarmingly dry.

"I wrote so much music for *Opposites* that I think I had nothing left in the tank," admits Neil. "I immediately had a bit of a panic, and my confidence took a bit of a hit. I felt like, fuck, I've forgotten how to write a song, I can't say anything new. It was just a weird state of mind for me. On previous albums, I've had a backlog of ideas when I've come home that I can't wait to get started on and this time, I didn't. It sounds ridiculous, but I genuinely felt like I'd lost my magic and my mojo."

An escape – both geographical and musical – provided Neil with a much-needed spark: "I went away to California for a few months; I wanted to write music without Biffy permeating my every thought. I didn't want to write music thinking about >

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Biffy Clyro (l to r): Simon Neil, James Johnston and Ben Johnston

whether it was the right thing for our band to do next, or whether these were songs we should be playing on a big stage in front of lots of people; it was the first time I'd ever felt that pressure.

"I went away and made a bunch of music – I made a weird electronic album [a long-player under the moniker ZZC is expected to surface in 2017 – Ed]. I wrote some songs with friends and I recorded in some friends' studios and I wasn't thinking about Biffy. Of course, that's when suddenly I started writing songs for Biffy. I'd built so much pressure on myself and forgotten the innocence of making music. As soon as I removed the pressure, I could see the beginnings of the record taking shape and when I came home, I had another wee burst of writing songs. They felt good, they felt fresh, they felt new. The one thing we didn't want to do was spend a year playing those songs in the practice room.

"There's four or five songs [on *Ellipsis*] we didn't even play together until we got to the studio. And that forced us not to rely on any routines or habits. Going into a seventh album, I think it's really important to break habits and try to forge some new ground. I don't think we were ever closed minded, but we only ever listened to rock music and loud, weird music with guitars, and it feels like in the last few years, we've managed to embrace inspiring music outside of that."

Although the band's last three records were made with Garth Richardson – a producer with impeccable rock credentials responsible for catching lightning in a bottle on Rage Against The Machine's legendary 1992 debut – the *Ellipsis* sessions saw Rick Costey man the desk.

> "I love it when someone means it. I had confidence issues last year, but now I'm more confident than ever"

"The last three records were very much about recording us as a band and making it as pretty and as huge as possible and really making it widescreen and cinematic, but very organic," says Neil. "After doing that over a double album, it felt like we had to force a change. Rich Costey's not necessarily just a rock guy. We loved his work with Fiona Apple, The Mars Volta, Boots, Mew... So we spoke to him about wanting to be a rock band, but do it in the weirdest way, the oddest way possible. So a rock band making a record without once standing in a room and playing live together."

Any mention of experimentation might make major record-label executives develop a nervous twitch, but the Biffy Clyro camp is still bursting with ambition: "I've definitely dealt with any punk-rock guilt. Now that this album is made, I want it to be a fucking huge record, I want everyone to love it. I want each thing to be better than the last thing we do. I'm under no illusions; no-one needs a seventh Biffy album but hopefully, they need *this* seventh Biffy album. I think it's fucking brilliant. But it's too easy to be comfortable. I don't want comfort in my rock 'n' roll. I don't want to listen to the radio and think that a hip-hop record or a pop record has more attitude than a fucking rock record.

"Rock music means everything to me and we're always going to be a rock band, but it's a strange time; I want to start hearing real fucking attitude. I feel like *Yeezus* by Kanye West was one of the most punk-rock albums that's been released in years. I feel like it has more attitude than a lot of the rock albums in the last five years combined. I love it when someone means it. I had confidence issues last year, but now I'm more confident than ever. We're so happy in our skin for the first time. We've accepted that we're kind >

of a big band, the punk-rock guilt's gone but we're gonna be a big band that asks something of the listeners. I don't want to just be another fucking band that disappears into the background. I want to put a Country and Western song on our record, I want to put an R&B song on our record, I want to push myself and I want to push other people."

And during the recording process for *Ellipsis*, the producer was pushing much more than just faders: "We shook the whole thing up," grins Simon. "My main guitar sound was this small Peavey combo from 1968, which Rich managed to find. It was absolutely tiny and we got the most vicious guitar sounds out of it. I've always been of the opinion that you get the big amps out, you turn them up, you get loads of them and that's the sound. And that's what I've done on the last three records, I've had eight amps running at once. This time, we'd spend a long time getting one sound just right. Rich uses a lot of pedals. I used a Black Volt amp, which I think was made initially for Daniel Lanois for one of his solo records; it was a hell of a sound, it was like molasses, so thick and dark. I used a Fender DeVille amp for a lot of my clean sounds. I still cannot see beyond that for clean sounds with a bit of bite.

"As much as a Stratocaster is kind of like an extra limb for me, when I'm in the studio, I like using different guitars. A Stratocaster is so percussive, and it's definitely more prevalent on this album than maybe our last couple with Garth, but there's a lot of Les Paul. I used a Mosrite – that had a real unique feel to it. There was a real twang to it, but it had a weight that the Stratocaster didn't have. I used my Marshall cab as well, my Marshall head and just lots of pedals.

"I wasn't above doing anything weird. There were certain points where Rich would have my guitar going through 16 pedals. We wouldn't even know which ones were switched on. Rich is a bit of a vibe merchant. He doesn't worry if things are over-distorted or if the needle is in the red. It's all about the sound. Whenever we were saying, 'oh the needle's in the red there', he'd be like, 'who gives a shit? Does it sound good or not?' And that was a really good mindset."

> "My main guitar sound was a small Peavey combo from 1968... we got the most vicious guitar sounds out of it"

Neil and Costey took the 'what sounds right, is right' recording ethos a step further, often aiming for the right kind of wrong: "With Garth, it felt like we were aiming for beautifully organic, classic guitar sounds, like Zeppelin or Sabbath or something. With this one, we were trying to fuck with the sound. We used a lot of effects that don't even sound like guitars. That was a new thing for me, to treat the guitar like more of a texture, and that was something I'm not used to, it was definitely Rich's input that contributed to that. He managed to get me to think about the guitar in a different way. I really appreciated that and it's something we'll explore more over the next couple of albums, as well.

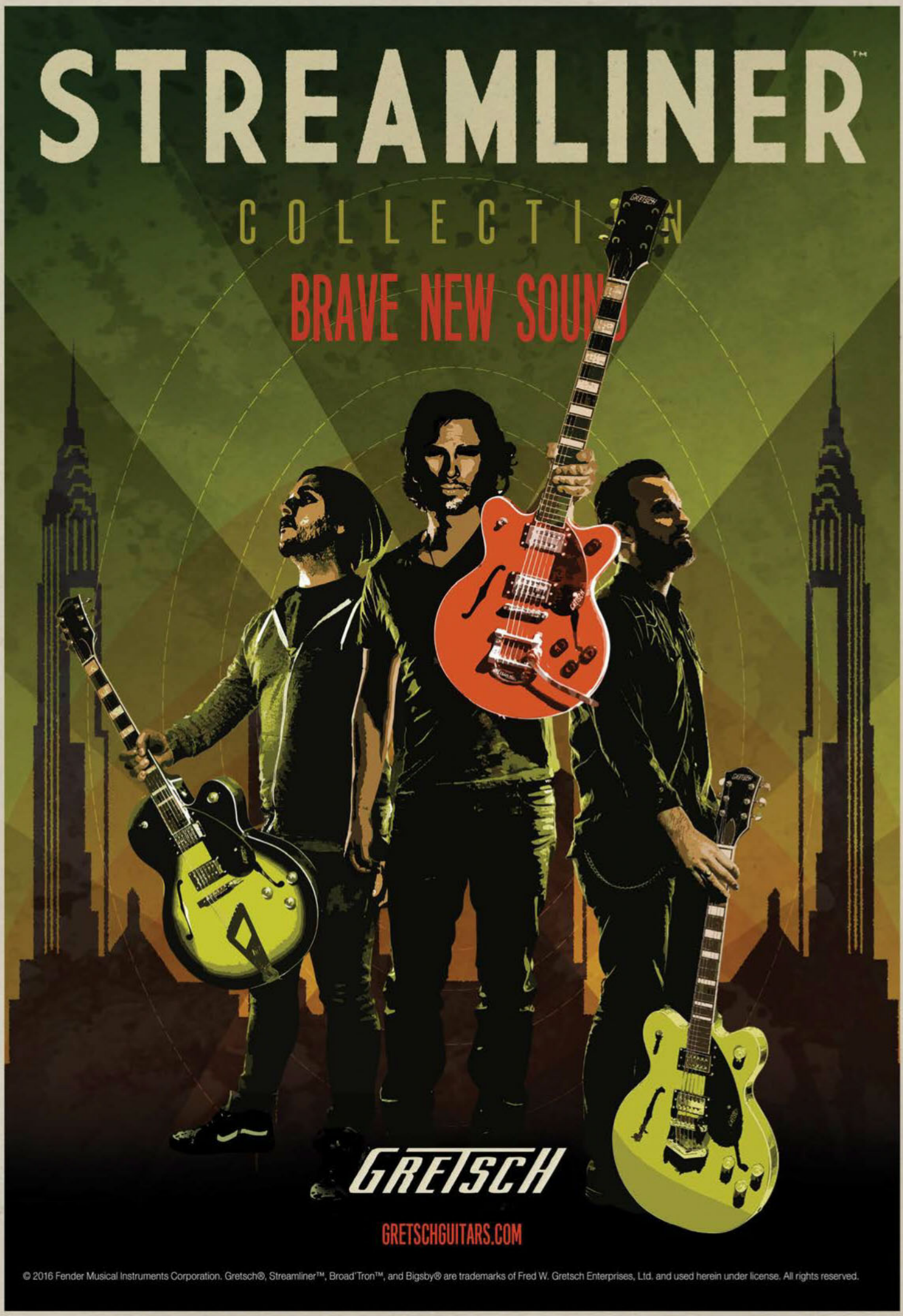
"I'm such a fan of big, heavy guitars, but Rich made me appreciate how heavy you can make a clean guitar sound. That's one of the reasons I love Mew. Some of their really heavy songs; the guitar is like glass. On a song like *On A Bang*, which is probably our most punk-rock moment on this record, I kept thinking, let's put shit-tonnes of distortion on it, let's make it growl, and fizzy. And Rich was like, let's start with a clean guitar and see what happens. And I ended up putting two guitars on that song and they're both pretty much completely clean with maybe a slight bit of overdrive. And I feel it's one of the heaviest guitar sounds I've ever had.

"I'm so used to standing in front of my amplifiers that I think sometimes, it can chase me into a corner; I feel so at home, so comfortable with that buzz of distortion washing over me... yet when you're making a record, it's a completely different thing."

Although change was the order of the day, Simon still turned to his old faithful Boss Metal Zone, even if: "whenever I try and put it on a record, the producer's always like, nope, it sounds shit."

Ironically, he's almost come full circle, as that particular pedal and another small Peavey combo, a Bandit, were used on Biffy Clyro's 2002 debut, *Blackened Sky*. "I didn't even do that math in my mind," laughs Neil. "For this album, we deliberately wanted to feel like we were making a debut album again, and kind of unlearn what we've done – but it's been a lot closer than I've even realised. Using a Peavey fucking combo and guitars straight in! It's bonkers!"

***Ellipsis* is out now on 14th Floor Recordings/ Warner Music**



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Pendulum Swing

Pendulum guitarist Peredur ap Gwynedd debuted the new Line 6 Helix in front of a gigantic festival crowd of 165,000 fans – plus a staggering 30 million more online. No pressure, then...

Interview **Chris Vinnicombe** | Photography **Robert Williams**

The Ultra Music Festival took place in Miami in March and saw the triumphant return to the live stage of electro-rockers Pendulum after a four-year hiatus. As well as the 165,000 fans in attendance, Pendulum's closing headline set reached 30 million viewers via a live internet stream and the global level of interest was such that the band's name was the eighth highest-trending hashtag on Twitter.

It's fair to say that the pressure was on for Pendulum's long-serving guitarist Peredur ap Gwynedd, and it was at this colossal show that he chose to debut a brand-new live rig, with the new Line 6 Helix floor-effects processor functioning as its hub. As road tests go, this wasn't exactly a Battle Of The Bands at the Red Lion on a Tuesday night and here, exclusively for *G&B*, Perry talks us through his journey with the Helix from rehearsal room to festival stage.

The old rig

"Previously with Pendulum, I was using the Hughes & Kettner TriAmp with a TC Electronic G-System. With Pendulum, I've always split my signal into an amp to get the valve sound and also into some sort of modelling. We used to run various modelling and synthetic amp simulations into the Muse Research Receptor; it's basically a rackmount computer that runs plug-ins natively. So bang in the middle, you get a proper valve-amp sound and either side, you get a synthetic sound. It fits in with the type of music Pendulum does – much of which is quite synthetic and generated from soft-synths and various synthesisers.

"You have to mix the guitar sound in with those type of sounds. Just an amp sound on its own kind of works, but you need something else as well to make it sound less rootsy. Even though I do love playing guitar straight in with no effects at all, for this situation, that's what helps. And I'm the only guitarist in the band, so I need a bit more of a spread. So that's what the old setup was.

"When Pendulum went on hiatus about four years ago, I started using a Hughes & Kettner GrandMeister 36. That's got some very basic delays and reverbs and modulations built in and I'd been using it on its own, basically, when I've been doing other things. I've been playing with Faithless for the last two years. With Faithless, all we needed was the one amp sound with a bit of delay in it. It's a lot more organic, and that's fantastic. But then we decided to restart the whole Pendulum thing and I had to think again!"

KEY FEATURES

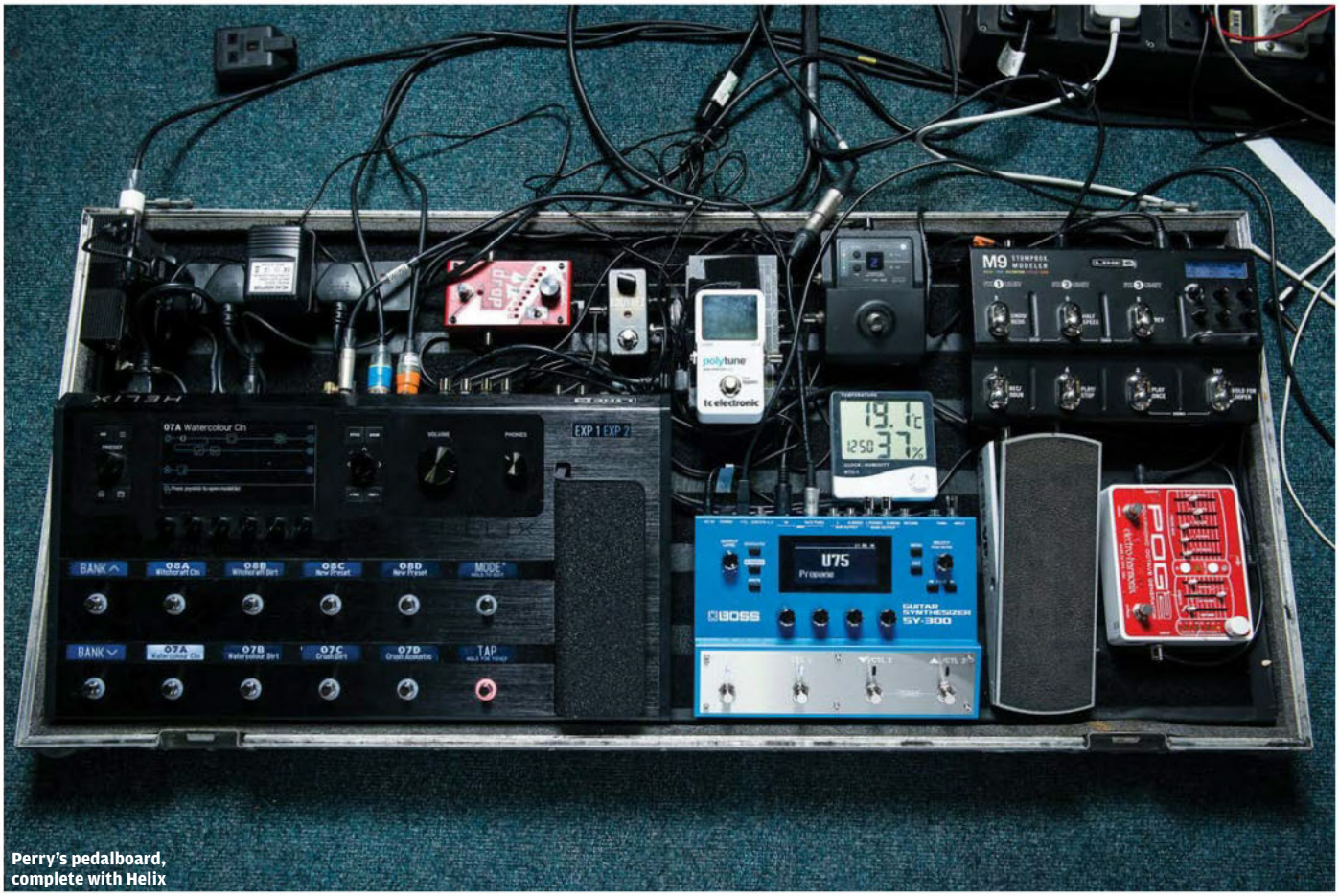
Line 6 Helix

- **PRICE** £1,147
- **DESCRIPTION** Digital floor multi-FX and modelling unit made in China. Dual DSP-powered HX modelling engine with four discrete stereo signal paths. 48 amps, 30 cabs, 16 mics and 91 effects. 12 footswitches. Guitar, aux and mic inputs. Variable interface. 4x send and return. 3x expression inputs. External amp switching and flexible routing options. USB connectivity. Deep MIDI control
- **DISPLAY** 6-inches, 800 x 480 pixels
- **DIMENSIONS** 782 (L) x 401 (W) x 180mm (H)
- **WEIGHT** 20.5 lbs (9.3kg)
- **CONTACT** Yamaha 0844 811 1116 **line6.com**

First encounter

"Rob Chapman and Lee Anderton featured the Helix on YouTube sometime last year and I thought, this is perfect. The main thing about it was the multiple inputs, and multiple outputs. I've never seen a floor effects unit that does that. The whole way the Helix is set up is exactly the way I wanted my rig to be >

The Line 6 Helix is rugged enough for stage use, as well as being a versatile studio tool



Perry's pedalboard, complete with Helix

set up a few years ago, before Pendulum went on hiatus. The hope was that this would sort it all out for me."

The new rig

"Basically, I'm running a GrandMeister 36 to get that valve-amp sound and I actually prefer it to the TriAmp. Even though it's a smaller amp, it sounds bigger, for some reason. It's got EL84s and I think it's the compression that makes it sound bigger at a lower volume.

"I run it at 18 watts even on massive stages. You get that little bit more compression, but it's still very loud. The whole point of those big stacks back in the 60s was because you only had a vocal PA; you needed a loud guitar amp to compete. Those stacks were the PA for the guitar. The GrandMeister works perfectly at 18 watts with Faithless and with Pendulum.

"My guitar is a PRS P24, so I've got two outputs. You've got the magnetic pickups and the piezo. I run the magnetic pickups into the Helix, then that gets split inside it; one output goes to the guitar amp, the other into the modelling side. We like this big, super-stereo guitar sound, and whichever modelled amp I'm running into gets split after the amp into a stereo delay. One side is dry, the other has a 25-millisecond delay. Then I put a stereo delay on top of that for certain songs!"

Sounds

"Usually, I change sounds on a track-by-track basis. The two heavy-sounding amplifier models in the Helix I gravitated towards were the Boogie Rectifier model [Cali Rectifire] for the main distortion and one of the Brit Plexi ones for the less distorted sound. As soon as I got the Helix, we were in rehearsals, I had to dial up a sound straight away. You know how it happens, you find a good sound and you mess around with it. Then I'm using the Divided By Thirteen [Divided Duo] model for more of a crunch sound; then for hyper-clean, the Twin Reverb [US Double]. Those are the four main amp models that I use; they work pretty well. Out of the front of house, the audience are listening to a stereo mix >

"The whole way the Helix is set up is exactly the way I wanted my rig to be set up a few years ago, before Pendulum went on hiatus"

Hughes & Kettner's GrandMeister 36 is Perry's valve amp of choice for live gigs

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of those models with the Hughes & Kettner blended in. I've got in-ear monitoring onstage. When I'm just playing the guitar without anyone else playing, it's quite a nice little world that I live in! It's not just left, right and middle; it's a very three-dimensional type of sound. It doesn't quite swirl around your head, but there's a massive sense of space in these lush guitar sounds.

"I've got the best of both worlds, because I've got the amp onstage. I've never gone the whole hog and gone with just modelling – I've always mixed the two. It works better like that for me. I like that organic feeling of a guitar in front of an amplifier, but I also like what the modelling stuff does as well.

"With the effects inside the Helix, I use some Whammy pedal [Pitch Wham]. I was always using a Whammy pedal in the Pendulum set and that's in there already. And also the wah-wah. You've got various types, but it's always the Cry Baby model for me. It was the first wah I bought when I was a kid, an Italian one from a shop in Camarthen."

> "I've got the best of both worlds, because I've got the amp onstage. I've never gone with just modelling – I've always mixed the two"

Pendulum bassist and founding member Gareth McGrillen is also a Line 6 Helix user

Playing nicely

"Setting up the Helix and integrating the other pedals was quite straightforward. The one problem I've always had with any pedalboard rig is earth hum, especially if you are splitting signals, but with this I didn't have any problem whatsoever, which was quite astounding, really, especially as I was using all of the effects loops on the Helix and various power sources. The signal was totally clean, it really shocked me.

"When we went to Miami for production rehearsals – the power in the states is notoriously bad, it's quite dirty power. Even when you switch on a hotel lamp the television screen goes a little bit dimmer! But taking it to the US and plugging it in and playing it for the first time was the first proper test, and again, it was totally clean. That is a massive plus point for me."

Ins and outs

"I ran out of effects loops really quickly, so a couple of pedals – the Line 6 M9 and EHX POG – are running in series. In a perfect world, instead of having four FX loops in the Helix, I'd have six. The Boss SY-300 Guitar Synthesizer, which I use as a pad, is in stereo so it uses up two, basically. I would have liked a few more to get more stuff in there, as there are certain pedals I have that can't be replicated. But when the synth is engaged, you have one electric-guitar signal split three ways: one into the amp, one into the modelling and one into the effects loop where the synth is, which blows my mind. The modelling and synth outputs are merged and they come out of the DI.

"The piezo signal from the PRS runs into a separate Audio Technica System 10 wireless unit, into the TC Electronic BodyRez and the auxiliary input of the Helix and that's got a separate out, so the front-of-house guy has control of the acoustic guitar sound on its own if he wants it. It could be mixed in if I want it to, but I prefer it separate, as it adds to the whole 3D nature of the sound. But as a workstation, the Helix is fantastic for integrating all that stuff. It's bloody great."

THE VERDICT

"Basically, everything has been miniaturised. My new rig is about 10 per cent of the size that it used to be, which is quite amazing. I'm using one 2x12 instead of two 4x12s, as well. But it sounds bigger, and is more controllable, which is nuts. Now I've got more control myself. Back in the old days, the Receptor wasn't in my world, it was over in the MIDI world, and a MIDI tech was looking after all that stuff. I was running leads across the stage into the Receptor, so I had no control over it at the front of the stage whatsoever. Thanks to the Helix, now I've got total control of all the sounds, on my pedalboard. You can control the GrandMeister with MIDI as well, so for me, it's kind of a dream come true, really."

DUESENBERG

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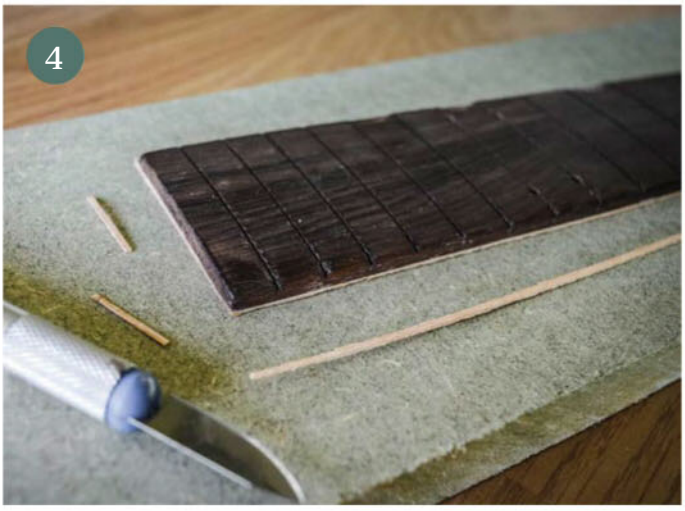
DIY WORKSHOP

GRETSCH CONVERSION WORKSHOP

In the latest instalment of his conversion of a vintage Gretsch from a single-pickup Anniversary model into his dream 6120, **Huw Price** fearlessly tackles the restoration of the neck and fingerboard



1 These sanding blocks are made in the UK and you can buy them fairly cheaply on Ebay. The 'board is set dead centre between the two guides and the radius block can move along the length of the 'board without twisting or tilting

2 The 'board started looking worse before it looked better. The repaired divots show up as light patches; the dark areas are the parts the radius block hasn't yet reached

3 After much effort, the fresh and clean wood is revealed. Fortunately, the divots weren't that deep. Note the shallow marker routs with the old glue at the bottom

4 The veneer-and-fingerboard sandwich was clamped to a flat board while the glue set. Afterwards, a craft knife was used to trim off the excess veneer

I want to start this month's workshop with an apology. This Gretsch was previously owned by a gentleman named Gene Sword, not 'Clyde', as I mistakenly wrote in the first instalment. I've been told his widow Carolyn and their family have been following this restoration with interest out there in Oklahoma, so I hope I can do Gene's guitar justice and finish the job he started.

And so to business. I've been putting off this part of the restoration because it required a lot of planning and there was some fiddly woodwork involved. To be honest, I'm generally happier with a soldering iron than hand tools. Before getting on to the fun stuff, though, the neck and fingerboard had to be properly restored.

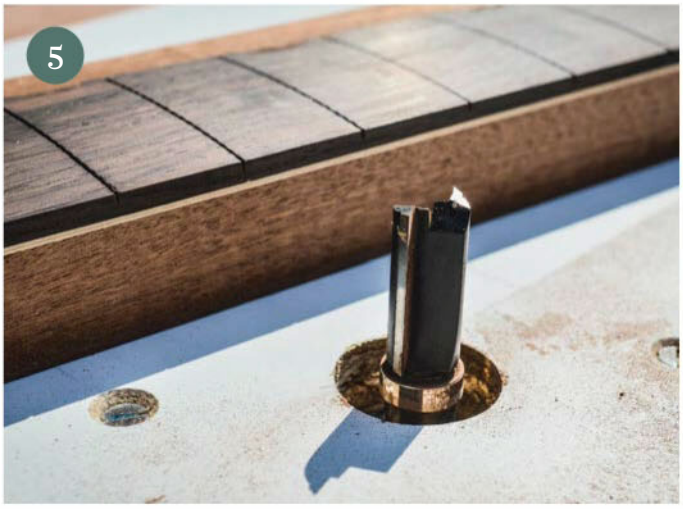
Saving the 'board

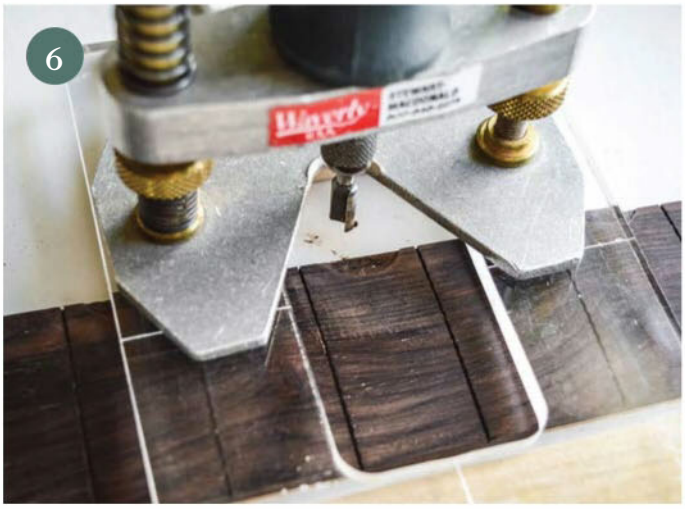
I could probably have made things a lot easier if I had bought a pre-slotted and radiused ebony fingerboard, but there was no way I was going to junk that Rio rosewood fingerboard unless I had to. However, it was in a shocking state when the guitar arrived and it looked even worse after it had been separated from the neck.

The main issue was play-wear divots on the first three positions, which had been filled with glue and wood dust, but the dust used wasn't rosewood. It was a light-coloured wood and to disguise the repair, the 'board had been painted over. Hoping they weren't too deep, I decided to try and sand through the repair patches and re-radius the 'board at the same time.

This guitar originally had a 7.25-inch radius, but I prefer 9.5 inches and I figured that flattening the radius would allow me to concentrate the sanding on the patched areas in the middle of the 'board, while leaving the edges more or less untouched. The 'board was hardly flat, either, and sighting along it with a straight edge, I could see numerous low spots. I used a 9.5-inch radius block with 320 grit paper taped to the underside, plus a lot of elbow grease and patience. I also had to make up a jig to guide the block. Taking a flat piece of plywood and two pieces of wood with dead-straight edges, I attached them to the plywood base, ensuring the gap between them was identical to the width of the radius block, then drew a centre line between them 1.

After marking the centre point at both ends of the fingerboard, I applied double-sided tape to the underside of the fingerboard and stuck it down between the guides, ensuring it was dead centre. Some notes here – collect the dust as you go and bag it up for future use. Also, vacuum up the work area and the sandpaper to keep things moving quickly. I find 3M SandBlaster is best for this sort of job, because it doesn't clog up 2.





It took a while, but eventually I got past the repair patches and ended up with a clean and flat 9.5-inch radius fingerboard. I was also pleased to see the beautiful rosewood grain and colour properly for the first time 3.

Adding strength

Having taken measurements before and after, I could tell the 'board had lost about 1.5mm in thickness. I had to prise it off the sanding jig very carefully and it felt a bit bendy and flimsy for my liking. Since the neck had felt just a bit too skinny for my taste when I played the guitar, I decided to reinforce the 'board and make up the thickness by glueing veneer to the bottom of the 'board.

Rosewood proved hard to get hold of, but I already had some leftover maple veneer. At 0.6mm thick, I decided to layer two pieces and I used Cascamite to glue them to the 'board. It's the same type of urea formaldehyde glue that Gibson used to attach maple caps to Les Pauls in the 1950s.

Once the glue had set, I trimmed off the excess with a craft knife and trued up the edges with a sanding block – taking care not to remove any rosewood. Now the 'board felt stiff and strong, and I noticed the tap tone had changed from an murky boing to a clear ping 4.

Prepping for binding

Since the plan has been to turn this into a 6120-inspired replica, I had always intended to bind the fingerboard. Even so, the 'board edges had suffered so much wear and damage, it would probably have needed binding anyway.

I sourced some light ivory cream binding from Rothko & Frost, which was a pretty good match for body binding. The fingerboard binding measured 5mm tall and 1.5mm wide, so I had to slice off just under 1.5mm from both sides of the 'board.

To do this, I used a routing table with a bearing-guided cutter bit. I taped the 'board to a dead-straight piece of timber, with an overhang of about 1.25mm. The timber guided the cutter and it took only a few seconds to trim both sides of the fingerboard. They were so dead straight and square I could stand the fingerboard up on its edges 5.

Adding the inlays

Sanding and trimming the 'zboard created some complications because the inlay routs had become much shallower and the original pearl thumbnails would hang over the edges. The neo-classical markers are an iconic Gretsch feature, so rather than trim them, I decided to re-rout the 'board to make them fit.

I placed each thumbnail onto the 'board and drew around the outlines with a pencil. This bit was scary, but I routed the 'board freehand using a Dremel in a >

5 To trim 1.25mm off the edge of the 'board for the binding and straighten the edges, a makeshift router table was put together. The fingerboard was taped to the mahogany board with a 1.25mm overhang, and a flush-cutting router bit with a guide bearing was used to shave the 'board

6 Re-radiusing the 'board and shaving the edge for binding meant the marker routs had to be re-cut. This was done by hand, using a Dremel on a router base

7 This marker is being test-fitted. All that gummy glue residue and sawdust will be cleaned off using isopropyl alcohol before it's glued in position. You can see the rout isn't quite deep enough for this marker

8 The markers were glued in place with Araldite epoxy glue, mixed with the sawdust that was saved when the fingerboard was sanded

9 Here's what the markers look like after they've been sanded flush. There are gaps here and there, but they're not as noticeable as Gretsch's were and they do provide a whiff of vintage authenticity

10 A 1.5mm sliver of 'board was cut off the end of the fingerboard before the binding was attached. A clamped radius block was used to guide the saw blade

11 As the Super Glue was setting, the binding was held tight to the 'board by masking tape. Afterwards, the tape was removed and the binding trimmed flush with the fingerboard

Stewart-MacDonald router base. I used a Perspex Filter'Tron routing template as a platform for the router base and placed a piece of wood under each side, so the Perspex would bridge the 'board. I also jacked up one side with a piece of veneer to compensate for the fingerboard radius and keep the rout depth consistent **6**.

Taking your time and taking great care with setting the router-bit height are the keys to doing this part successfully **7**. Once all the routs were done, I cleaned off any stick residue from the thumbnails, mixed a little of my saved rosewood dust into some Araldite epoxy glue and glued them in position **8**. Ideally, all the markers will end up a fraction-of-a-millimetre proud of the 'board. Once the glue was set, I mixed more epoxy and rosewood dust to fill any gaps. Eventually, I was able to put the fingerboard back into my radius-sanding jig to make everything level once again **9**.

Slots

Allparts UK supplied some medium-jumbo fretwire, which I have previously used to re-fret old Gibsons. The tangs are somewhat wider and deeper than the wire Gretsch used, so I used my fret saw to prepare the existing slots for the new wire.

This has to be done before you fix the binding to the fingerboard for obvious reasons. If those reasons aren't obvious to you, please don't attempt a project like this. It's also essential that the slots should be wide enough for the fret wire, because if they're too narrow, you can end up introducing a back bow to the fingerboard and you may not be able to get it flat enough to glue back onto the neck.

Binding

The first bit of binding had to go onto the body end of the fingerboard. If you examine vintage Gretsches, you'll see that the end of the neck extension is usually visible below the binding. To achieve this same look, I had to saw a binding's width of material from the end of the fingerboard.

I used my radius block to mark the position of the cut and to guide the saw blade. Keeping the saw straight and square is crucial to getting a good result **10**. Work carefully, because when you're slicing off a 1.5mm sliver of wood, it will be more likely to snap than to cut. In fact, some of this 'board snapped off and I had to square up the end with a sanding block.

Various glues can be used to attach binding to wood, but I decided on Super Glue. For this application, you should get the medium- or thick-viscosity stuff and not the water-thin Super Glue you can buy in a corner shop – you want the glue to stay where you put it and not run absolutely everywhere. The Rothko & Frost binding glued up fast – so fast that it was pretty much

fixed before I had even applied the masking tape to hold it in position.

It scrapes flush very easily, too. I used a fresh Stanley blade to level everything off, taking care to make it square with the fingerboard edges. Gretsch didn't bother with mitre joints, so I opted for an original-style lap joint.

Thicker Super Glue makes it less likely that you'll stick your fingers together, but you must take great care nevertheless. Wrapping your fingers in masking tape can help, but the best advice is to keep your fingers moving and don't leave them too long in one place.

Before glueing the side binding, I ensured the fret slots were clean and clear of debris. It's futile and risky to try and line the binding up with the edges. Instead, leave a slight overlap on the top and bottom of the fingerboard and trim the binding flush after the glue has set. It's quick and easy, and you get neater results.

You can use a scraper or blade to remove the excess binding along the top edges of the fingerboard, but my advice would be to leave the binding slightly proud and finish the job by sanding the binding flush in the radius jig. You can use finer grades of paper, because the plastic sands easily and the 320 grit paper does leave sanding marks along the board.

Try 600 grit followed by 1,000 grit to smooth the board in the jig, and then you can finish up by hand rubbing the surface with ultra-fine micromesh. You should be able to see reflections in the wood at the end of it. If you've made it this far, you'll be pleased to know the 'board is finally ready for frets 11.

Trueing for glue

The headstock face and the top of the neck both had to be clean and level before the headstock overlay and fingerboard could be glued onto the neck. I started by filling gaps in the truss-rod skunk stripe, which had broken away when the fingerboard was removed. They were fairly shallow, but I wanted to eliminate any voids. Two-Pack Ronseal Wood Filler did the job 12.

Most kitchen work surfaces are very flat, so after checking mine, I taped some 240-grit 3M SandBlaster paper to the worktop surface and set about levelling the neck 13. It was fairly straight, but the tongue kicked up slightly. Levelling the neck also removed all traces of the original glue to leave clean wood, and this task had to be completed before the headstock overlay was glued on 14. Next, I levelled the headstock face in exactly the same way, to eliminate a fairly noticeable dip in the centre.

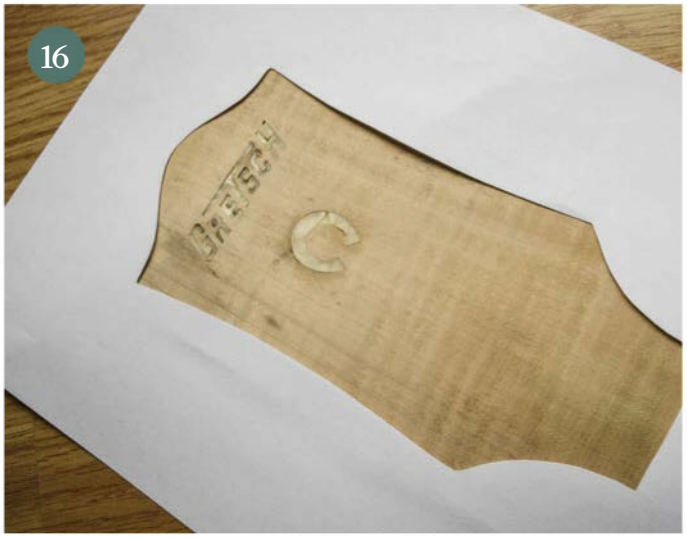
Headstock overlay

But before we get into that, there's the headstock overlay to consider. You may recall that the original overlay was chipped and full of >

12 Strips of masking tape were run both sides of the truss-rod fillet before the filler was applied. The masking tape was then removed to ensure the filler only went where it was needed

13 A clean and level surface is needed before the 'board can be glued back onto the neck. The headstock face was levelled in the same way

14 Here's the top of the neck, sanded level and ready for the fingerboard to be glued back on



15 We're not sure of the vintage, but this is a genuine NOS Gretsch-factory headstock overlay

16 In classic Gretsch style, the inlays were wonky and the headstock was asymmetrical. The only way to line this up was by eye

17 Lots of clamps and a plastic-coated 'board were used to glue the overlay onto the headstock

18 With the overlay edges trimmed flush with the headstock, this guitar is starting to look like a Gretsch once again

holes, and the original Gretsch logo had melted somewhat. Consequently, I wasn't exactly heartbroken when the removal process caused it to disintegrate. However, I was left with the dilemma of how to replace it.

It's easy enough to buy a maple headstock overlay, but I really couldn't face the prospect of cutting out a horseshoe and all the logo letters from mother-of-toilet-seat. Occasionally, NOS Gretsch-factory headstock overlays do become available online, and happily, I found one for sale on The Gretsch Discussion Pages.

Even more excitingly, it was being sold by a very well-known Barcelona-based guitarist called Biel Ballester. Biel has completed a few stunning Gretsch-conversion projects of his own and when he's not busy with his Biel Ballester Trio, he has been known to jam with Woody Allen.

Anyway, I figured the expense was worth it, considering I'd be getting an authentic Gretsch part and saving myself a few days of tedious work. The overlay duly arrived and I was delighted to find there was a fair bit of flame in the maple 15. Thanks, Biel!

This is where it becomes apparent just how haphazard things were back in the Brooklyn factory. Look closely at most vintage Gretsches and you'll see that nothing is really square or symmetrical. This headstock and overlay were no exception, but it's all part of the quirky vintage Gretsch charm.

I drew the headstock outline onto a piece of A4, cut out the shape and placed it on top of the overlay. My buddy Daniel Nicholas out in Amsterdam had kindly sent me measurements taken from his own 1959 6120, so I knew that the distance from the top of the T-roof to the top of the headstock should be about 27mm. Having marked that point on the overlay, I jimmied the outline around until I liked the look and drew the headstock outline onto the overlay 16.

Cutting the overlay with a jeweller's saw went quickly enough and I left a couple of extra millimetres for wiggle room. I used Cascamite glue, because there were gaps and glue residue on the overlay's underside: Cascamite is known for its gap-filling properties and its ability to stick most things to anything 17. After 24 hours, I removed the clamps, scraped the edges flush with a fresh blade and breathed a sigh of relief.

NEXT MONTH...

While he recovers from his recent Gretsch ordeal, Huw will be spraying and relicing a swamp-ash T-type body, so check in next month for the gory details

Guitar & Bass AWARD CHOICE 9/10

"Things start happening about 10 o'clock, and the distortion is as smooth and furry as a bucket of chinchillas"

Richard Purvis
Guitar & Bass Magazine

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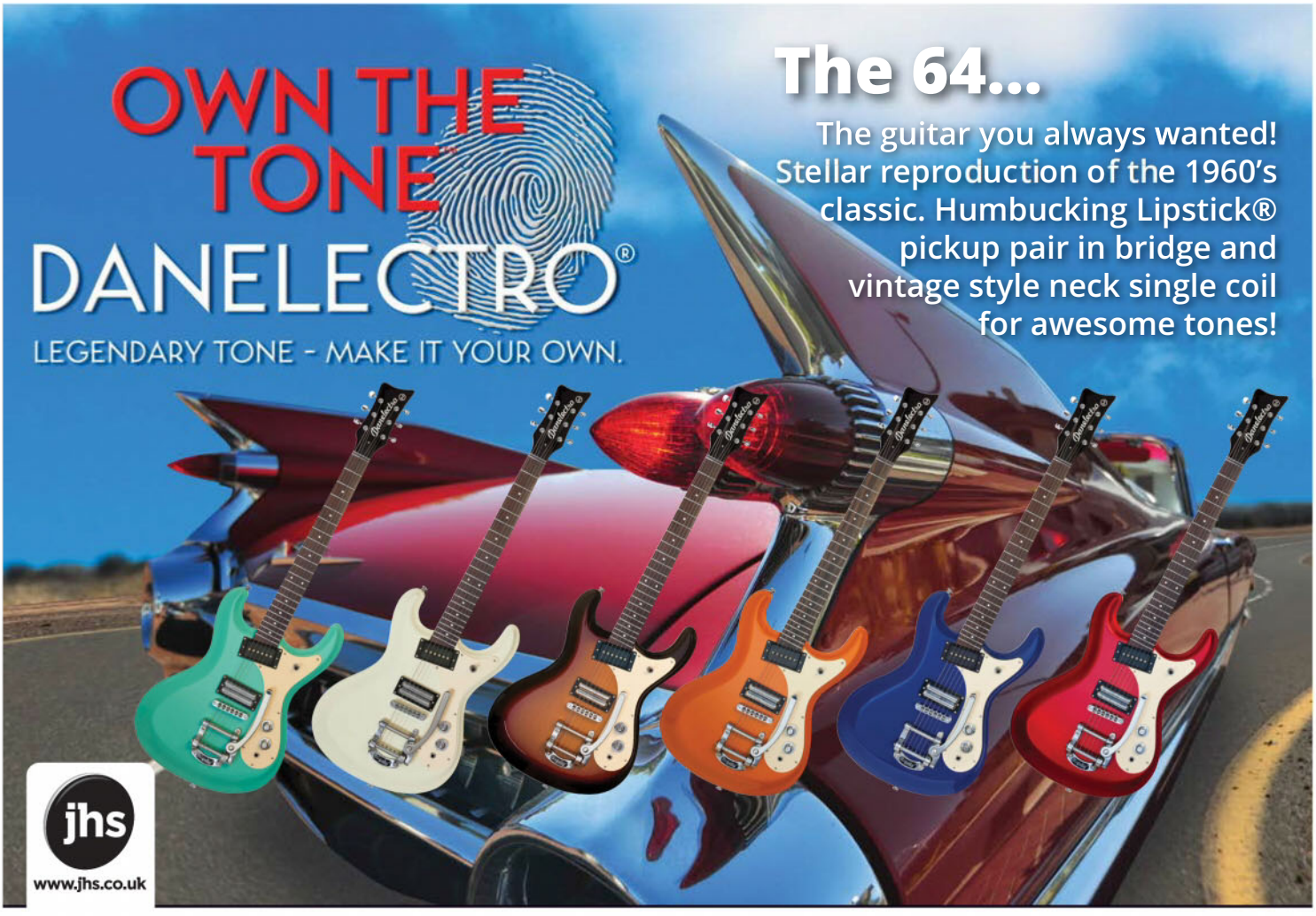

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Fano Standard JM6

Masters of bespoke boutique go ready-made. **CHRIS VINNICOMBE** finds out if the Fano experience is alive and well in the new Standard Series...

October 2015 saw Dennis Fano leave the company he founded and launch Novo Guitars. Happily, though, Fano Guitars continues to exist, manufacturing Dennis' vintage-inspired Alt de Facto designs until recently in Arroyo Grande, California and now Scottsdale, Arizona as part of the Premier Builders Guild portfolio that also contains Two-Rock and Tone King amplifiers. Fano himself may have left the building, but the Scottsdale workshop is headed up by Jack Schwarz, a Fender veteran of more than 30 years.

While the Alt de Facto instruments offer an array of custom options – there are numerous pickup and hardware configurations, a rainbow of finishes and even 12 different knob types from which to choose – prices start at £2,299 and rise to around £3,499. Great guitars they may be, but the Alt de Factos remain unattainable objects of lust for many of us. Wouldn't it be nice if there was a more affordable option? That's where the Standard Series comes in...

Although prototypes made an appearance at Summer NAMM 2015, it's taken a while for these instruments to land in the UK. Priced at a more working man- or woman-friendly £1,699, both the Standard JM6 we have here and the Standard SP6 (very much a Telecaster/Les Paul Special collision) take two staples of the Alt de Facto range and offer them in a limited number of colours, pre-configured with Fano-branded hardware and pickups lacking any options aside from a P-90-equipped version of the JM6.

Hot-rodded and stripped-down offset guitars are nothing new, of course. However, aspiring noiseniks and alt. rockers have a lot more choice these days than they did back in the 80s, when the likes of Sonic Youth were gaffer-taping over or pulling out the rhythm circuits of dirt-cheap and unfashionable vintage Jazzmasters and Jaguars and routing them for humbuckers. The current Fender catalogue contains several mid-price 'buckered Jaguar and Jazzmaster models, but the JM6 brings a boutique vibe and a little Gibson influence to the party with a back-angled headstock and slight neck pitch designed to help it play nicely with a tune-o-matic bridge.

The JM6 brings a boutique vibe and Gibson influence to the party with a back-angled headstock and slight neck pitch

The JM6 here could be regarded as a 'transition' model as, despite the 'Hand Made In California' decal, its serial number indicates that the neck and body were cut and finished in CA and distressed and assembled in Arizona. The level of distress applied to the Standard Series' nitrocellulose finishes is categorised as 'light', but the artificial ageing of our Candy >

The tune-o-matic bridge and stop tailpiece are among the Gibson influences

KEY FEATURES

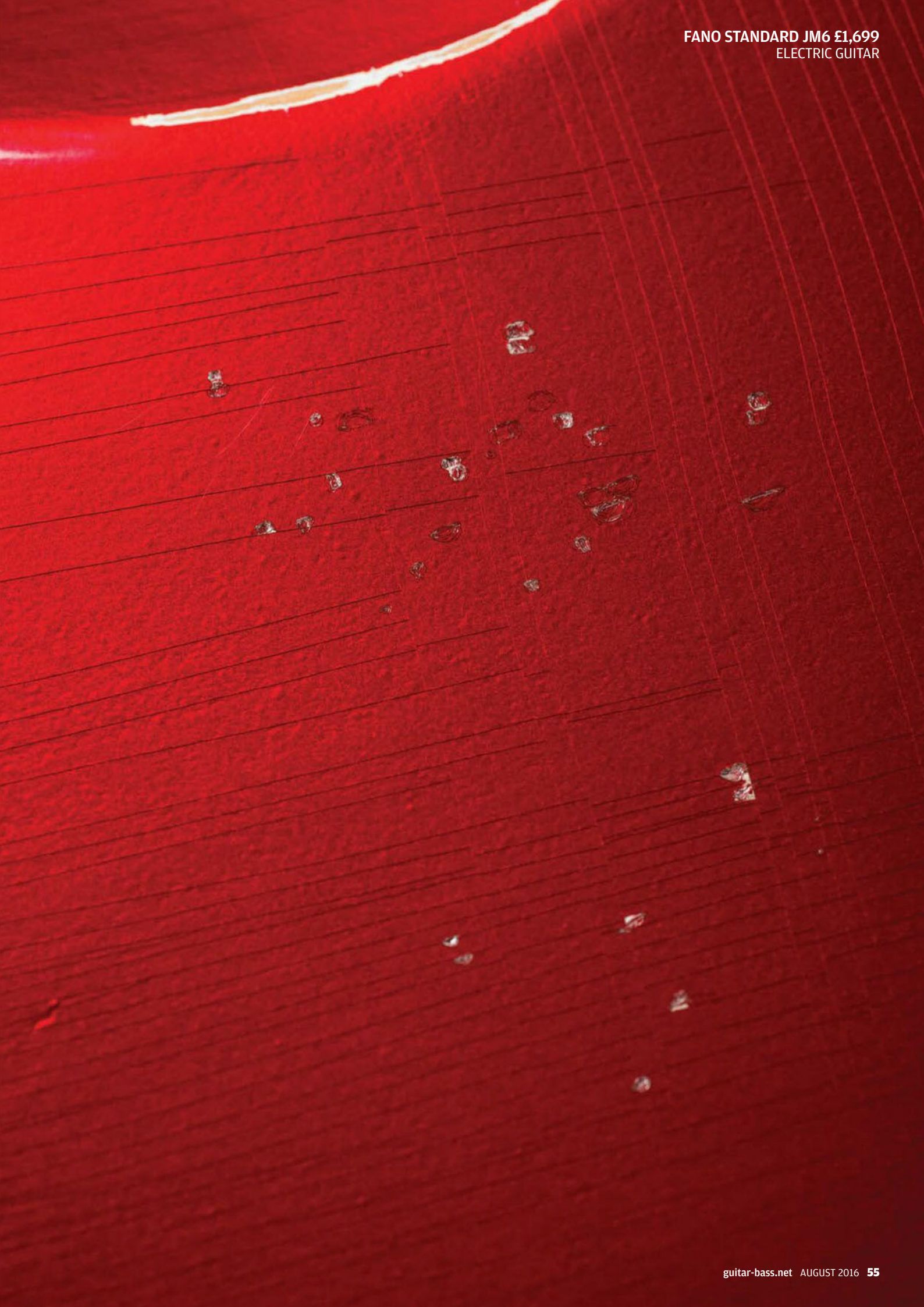
Fano Standard JM6

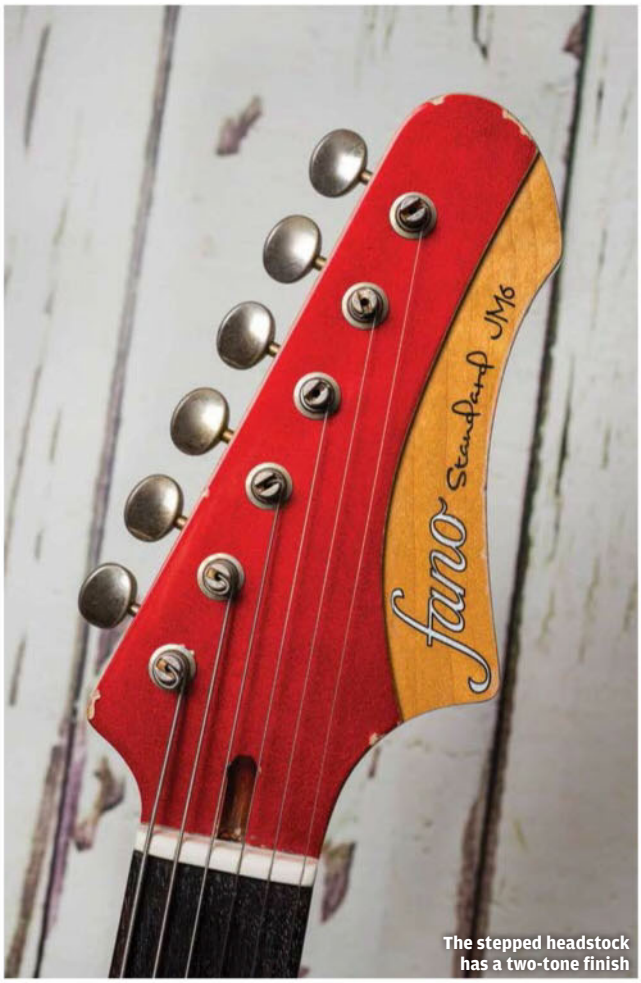
- **PRICE** £1,699 (inc gigbag)
- **DESCRIPTION** Offset solidbody electric. Made in USA
- **BUILD** Solid alder body, bolt-on maple neck, compound 7.25-9.5" radius rosewood fingerboard with dot inlays, Tusq XL nut and 22 Jescar '6105' frets, aged pearl lid pickguard
- **HARDWARE** Fano-branded aged nickel vintage-style tuners, tune-o-matic bridge and stop tailpiece
- **ELECTRICS** 2x Fano humbuckers, master volume, master tone, 3-way toggle pickup-selector switch
- **SCALE LENGTH** 25.5"/648mm
- **NECK WIDTH** 41.5mm at nut, 50.5mm at 12th fret
- **NECK DEPTH** 21mm at first fret, 23.4mm at 12th fret
- **STRING SPACING** 35.5mm at nut, 51mm at bridge
- **WEIGHT** 7.5lb/3.4kg
- **FINISH** Distressed nitrocellulose Candy Apple Red, Bull Black, Ice Blue Metallic
- **OPTIONS** 2x P-90 version available with Olympic White, Bull Black and Ice Blue Metallic finishes (no extra charge)
- **LEFT-HANDERS** No
- **CONTACT** Coda Music 01438 350815
  www.coda-music.com
  www.fanoguitars.com

While the level of distress is officially described as 'light', you may feel it comes closer to medium

The curved cutaway allows improved upper-fret access compared to the traditional square Fender heel design

The neck and body were cut in California and assembled and distressed in Arizona





The stepped headstock has a two-tone finish

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...
Dennis Fano's newest designs can be found under the **Novo Guitars** banner, and the range starts with the wonderful **Serus T £2,199** that recently scored a perfect 10 in these very pages. If you want a bona-fide Fender offset equipped with humbuckers, then check out the cheap but chunky-sounding **Standard Jazzmaster HH £529**. The **K-Line San Bernardino £1,999** is another cool boutique variation on the hotrod offset theme.

Apple Red guitar is more of a 'medium' considering the number of simulated dings, wear marks and exaggerated checking on the alder body and stepped maple headstock. Aside from a few dings near the body end, the amber-tinted neck remains glossy, while the edges of the dark rosewood slab 'board have been rolled for comfort.

There's no hardcase included, which in this price bracket may make one or two eyebrows twitch. But if we're thinking pragmatically, a nicely padded gigbag such as the Fano-branded example supplied here offers more-than-sufficient protection for a bolt-on solidbody. This is especially true when travelling to the kind of gigs that the majority of us play regularly. And the fact that you can sling it over one shoulder while carrying something else in your hands means you can make one fewer trip up that awkward pub staircase from the car or van, leaving more time for drink... ahem, rocking.

In use

There are some traces of what could be white buffing compound in the fingerboard's pores here and there, but otherwise, like every other Fano design we've played, the neck is a thing of joy. The medium-slim 'early 60s C' has a slinky feel, while the compound 'board radius transitions sympathetically from a barre chord-friendly vintage 7.25 inches to a more contemporary 9.5.

An instrument with a 25.5-inch scale length this may be, but there's no painful tautness here, just an addictive fluidity that opens doors rather than closing them. Aided by 22 bend-friendly frets and a curved neck join design that has less mass on the treble side than the traditional square Fender heel, high-register lead and chord playing is a breeze. Fretwire obsessives take note: although the official spec claims that this is Jescar 6105 fretwire, '6105' is Dunlop nomenclature, so this is most likely Jescar 55090, which shares that particular Dunlop wire's 2.29mm width and 1.4mm crown height.

With a crunchy amp tone, the JM6's bridge pickup is perfect for grungy powerchord rock from across the pond

Although a little hotter than our reference vintage PAF clones, plugging in reveals the Fano humbuckers are not overcooked and have more of the articulate clarity of high-quality aftermarket boutique units than you'd get from generic, mass-produced 'buckers. The JM6 sounds great for a wide variety of playing styles, but there's no doubt that this guitar's aesthetic persuaded us initially to indulge some teenage influences that hadn't been given an airing for a while.

With a crunchy amp tone, the JM6's bridge pickup is absolutely perfect for grungy powerchord rock from across the pond, and we found ourselves dusting off long-forgotten Nirvana riffs and songs from the first couple of Weezer and Foo Fighters records. The JM6 is not stuck in the 90s, though; more recent, muscular heavy rock is served as equally well as rootsier styles from further back in time.

Fano's decision to opt for poise over power when it comes to pickup voicing also pays dividends when you back off the gain, as a springy, bolt-on spank enters the picture, translating the likeable acoustic character of the instrument effectively into an amplified context. It may be a dual-humbucker solidbody, but jangly arpeggios, pretty Hendrix-y clean parts and even fluid blues passages are covered with style. While offset guitars have often been characterised as instruments that belong on the fringes in the hands of leftfield experimentalists, the Standard JM6 deserves a place in the mainstream.

Guitar & Bass VERDICT

+ Excellent weight and balance
+ Doesn't feel or sound like a compromise
+ Infectiously playable
- Pickup-selector switch may get in the way when the guitar is slung low

The JM6 has always been a potent cocktail of vintage and contemporary influences. Now it's more affordable but still looks, sounds and feels the part

9/10

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Albert Hammond Jr. – The Strokes

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Gretsch Electromatic G5420T & G5422G-12

After Gretsch introduced the affordable Streamliner Series, the Electromatic line could only move up. **HUW PRICE** investigates...

Gretsch really upped its game with the new Streamliner series, so much so that you might have wondered if the old Electromatic lineup may have lost some of its *raison d'être*. Fear not: Gretsch has responded by introducing a raft of Electromatic upgrades, but it has maintained the same price point.

Many of these upgrades are cosmetic and perhaps the most obvious changes have been made to the headstocks. The large-paddle mid-50s outline has changed to a smaller late-50s shape; binding has been added and the Electromatic logo has been shifted southwards to the pickguard.

Vintage-style open-geared tuners have replaced the sealed units on the six-string models. Personally, I'm delighted to see them – they work smoothly and hold tuning superbly. I live in hope that Gretsch will one day commission vintage-accurate Waverly repros, if only for the top-spec models, but these are more than good enough to be going on with.

Synthetic bone has been upgraded to Graphtec NuBone (um, okay), and the thumbnail markers are back on 'board after a humpy ride. The multi-ply, off-white binding looks a heap better than stark white and inside the body, a treble-bleed capacitor has been added to the master volume. Best of all, you get large bound f-holes, which almost shout 'classic Gretsch' across the room.

Although very much rooted in Gretsch tradition, the Electromatics have certain contemporary concessions. tune-o-matic-style bridges have found their way onto countless Gretsches, both old and new, and many prefer the more accurate intonation they can provide. The controls are also slightly simplified by the absence of a 'mud switch'. Instead, you get a master volume, individual volumes and a master tone to go with the three-way pickup selector.

Gretsch has introduced a raft of upgrades but maintained the price point

Vintage Gretsches were made with three-layer laminates, but the current Electromatic models have five layers. Consequently, these guitars have a more solid and robust feel, along with a touch more weight. This solidbody/hollowbody hybrid feel is aided and abetted by a neck joint that extends to the 20th fret and a single post beneath the bridge that ties the top to the back. It's sort of a half-trestle arrangement.

G5422G-12 Electromatic

This is a formidable-looking instrument, especially since the hardware has been upgraded from chrome to gold. The metalwork absolutely gleams against the jet-black gloss finish; the off-white binding looks fantastic and Gretsch has stuck with the hump-block markers. Die-cast tuners are used because there simply isn't enough space to accommodate the larger footprint of the open gears used on its six-string stablemate, so there's a touch of neck heaviness. Besides that, the general feel and weight of this guitar make it supremely comfortable.

In use

This is the best unplugged tone I've heard from an electric 12-string since I last played a vintage Fender Coronado. It's also possibly the easiest playing electric 12 I've encountered, and the intonation is superb. Unlike some 12-strings, it does exactly what you want and there's no necessity to show it who's the boss.

Some electric 12s leave you wondering if life might be simpler with a harmoniser or a chorus pedal, because the 12-string tone can be frustratingly muted. The G5422G-12 leaves no room for ambiguity, because its 12-string character is unmistakeable.

The pickups do a superb job of capturing the airy acoustic chime and adding a bit of electronic fairy dust. It can jangle with the best of them and the string spacing is well judged >

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Gretsch Electromatic G5422G-12

When Fender reissued the Coronado, it's a shame the company didn't bother with the 12-string version. Instead, check out the **Hagstrom Viking Deluxe 12 £607** and the **Italia Rimini 12 £569**

Gretsch Electromatic G5420T

There are plenty of cheaper and pricier options but few can compete with Gretsch for build and sound quality at this price. Even so, you could consider the semi solid **Fender Starcaster £610** or a **Guild Starfire II £663**

for strumming and arpeggiating alike. Bass notes sound solid, trebles are bright but not shrill and string-to-string balance requires no compressor assistance.

Although its vibe and sound is firmly rooted in the 60s, the G5422G-12 can be used to create fascinating textures and ambient effects when you start mixing it up with delay, modulation and reverb. All very inspiring.

G5420T Electromatic

Okay, I'll admit that I'm a sucker for Gretsch guitars with flashy finishes. It's probably something to do with the incongruity of such traditionally styled jazz instruments and the types of finish a 50s street racer might have painted his hotrod. So this Fairlane Blue metallic finish had me hooked right away.

Overall, the build quality impresses enormously. The bridge base fit in particular deserves a mention, because I can't see any gaps whatsoever. The only complaints I have are the one-size-fits-all feel of the NuBone nut and some scraper marks on the inside surfaces of the f-hole binding... but I'm really just nitpicking.

In use

Although it's a big armful, the 5420T's lap and strap balance is really good, and the neck profile is just deep enough to feel appropriate for the body without being offputting for those who don't like fat necks. It's characterful, without straying too far from the generic.

The sound post dampens acoustic response to add sustain and reduce feedback, but it's still fun to play unplugged, with its naturally jangly treble. There is some buzzing from the bridge area and some choking out around the 14th fret, but both are easy enough to remedy.

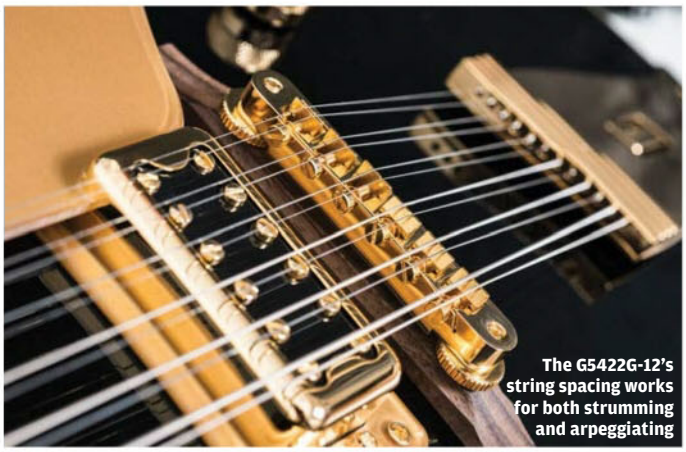
The pickups sound like Filter'Trons should, but with a little added bark and grit. The bridge delights with a phasey honk across the wound strings, a sparkly treble and enough of that wiry, countrified 'squark' to remind you why mellow jazz stylings were always more closely associated with a different 'G' brand. This is more Townshend power chords, Aussie riffs and rockin' twang.

Having said that, the contrasting neck pickup dishes up loads more woody goodness in the lows and rounded sustain in the treble, with an articulate ping at the front of notes. It's a creditable jazz tone that can get very bluesy with a touch of overdrive and even veer into hard rock and fusion with high gain.

The inbetween position hollows out the mids and seems to soften the transient attack. If you like playing fingerstyle, this is the place to be. With a thumb pick and a touch of slapback, I was utterly transported.

Gretsch's Streamliners and Electromatics offer superb value for money. If you don't have the funds or inclination to go above £500, the Streamliners won't disappoint, but the Electromatics are a significant step up for the extra money.

As well as looking, feeling and sounding better, the Blacktop Filter'Trons provide that undeniable whiff of authenticity. I've come to regard them as a sonic option, rather than a cheaper alternative to the name-brand Filter'Trons. For most of us, a 12-string electric would be a luxury item, but the G5422G-12 has to be regarded as a genuine contender, because it's outstanding. As for the G5420T, it's a serious Gretsch at an affordable price, which nevertheless has oodles of customisation potential.



The G5422G-12's string spacing works for both strumming and arpeggiating

KEY FEATURES

G5420T Electromatic

- **PRICE** £709
- **DESCRIPTION** Hollow-body electric guitar, made in Korea
- **BUILD** 5-ply laminated-maple body with sound post under bridge, set maple neck with medium U profile, 12"-radius rosewood fingerboard with pearloid thumbnail markers and 22 medium-jumbo frets
- **HARDWARE** Bigsby vibrato, Adjusto-Matic bridge, open-gear tuners, chrome 'G' arrow knobs
- **LEFT-HANDERS** Yes (Flagstaff Sunset only)
- **FINISHES** Fairlane Blue, Aspen Green, Orange Stain
- **SCALE LENGTH** 625mm/24.6"
- **NECK WIDTH** 43mm at nut, 53mm at 12th fret
- **NECK DEPTH** 20mm at first fret, 23mm at ninth fret
- **STRING SPACING** 35mm at nut, 52mm at bridge
- **WEIGHT** 3.2kg/7lbs
- **CONTACT** Fender GBI, 01342 331700 **www.gretschguitars.com**

KEY FEATURES

G5422G-12 Electromatic

- **PRICE** £929
- **DESCRIPTION** Hollow-body 12-string electric guitar, made in Korea
- **BUILD** 5-ply laminated maple body with sound post under bridge, set maple neck with medium U profile, 12" radius rosewood fingerboard with pearloid hump-block markers and 22 jumbo frets
- **HARDWARE** 'G'-stamp tailpiece, Adjusto-Matic bridge, die-cast tuners, gold 'G' arrow knobs
- **LEFT-HANDERS** No
- **FINISHES** Walnut, Black
- **SCALE LENGTH** 625mm/24.6"
- **NECK WIDTH** 45mm at nut, 55mm at 12th fret
- **NECK DEPTH** 20mm at first fret, 23mm at ninth fret
- **STRING SPACING** 38mm at nut, 55mm at bridge
- **WEIGHT** 3.25kg/7.1lbs

Guitar & Bass VERDICT

+ Fantastic looks and finish
+ Authentically Gretsch-y tones
+ Treble-bleed capacitor
+ Easy playing
+ Stable tuning

- Some slight buzzes and rattles
- Nut slots could be lower

Old-school Gretsch looks with rockier tones, simpler controls and slick modern playability

9/10

Guitar & Bass VERDICT

+ Easy playability
+ Wonderful tone
+ Gorgeous looks
+ Impressive intonation
+ High-quality tuners

- Inevitable neck heaviness

An outstanding 12-string electric which sounds superb plugged and unplugged, with easy playing action

9/10

Jan Akkerman w. Coen Molenaar
Koningsdag Concert, Zwolle

Otto Williams w. Jeffrey Daniel
Shalamar, O2 Arena Newcastle

Florian Friedrich
Sven Ratzke Group

Belvedere Bailey
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Marcos Villaverde
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Fender Deluxe

Guitar AWARD CHOICE 9/10

Fender Deluxe Strat HSS & Classic '68 Strat Texas Special

Two new Strats separated by 5,000 miles of Pacific Ocean, inspired by very different eras. **CHRIS VINNICOMBE** racks up the air miles...

Although they share that timeless, curvaceous double-cutaway body shape and a large headstock outline, the instruments here represent very different variations on the Stratocaster design. Revealed first at the recent Summer NAMM show in Nashville, the Deluxe Strat HSS is part of an all-new, Mexican-made Deluxe range, while the Japanese Classic '68 Strat Texas Special comes from the limited-edition Fender Special Run (aka FSR) series.

The previous Mexican Deluxe line existed for over a decade but contained models with many disparate design elements. For 2016, Fender has reimagined the range as a 'little brother' to its high-end American Elite Series and unified the models with a consistent feature set, much of which has trickled down from the company's previous American Deluxe range. The 2016 Deluxe models comprise this HSS model, plus Roadhouse and ash-bodied Deluxe SSS Stratocasters, Nashville and Thinline Telecasters, active Precision, Jazz and 5-string Jazz basses, a Dimension bass and a Dimension 5-string.

Common features on all new Deluxe guitars include first-generation Vintage Noiseless single-coil pickups with alnico 2 magnets (as seen on the Eric Clapton Signature Stratocaster), modern bridges, locking tuners with vintage-style buttons, 12-inch fingerboard radii, 'Tall Narrow' frets with equivalent dimensions to Dunlop 6105 wire, contoured heels, 'enhanced' electronics and switching, and pearloid dots. The HSS model here features a Twin Head Vintage humbucker in the bridge with a thick aluminium base plate designed to reduce magnetic interference.

The FSR Classic '68 Strat Texas Special is a much more old-school proposition, broadly similar to the current, Mexican-made Classic Series '70s Stratocaster (£689), sans the U-shaped neck and with the benefit of a purist-pleasing four- rather than three-bolt neck joint. There's also a trio of Texas Special pickups. Like many of Fender's mid-price vintage-style models, it's much more an 'inspired by' tribute to an era rather than a slavish reproduction.

In use

The '68 has a nice, medium weight, but the first thing that strikes you is just how thin the neck is. This, in combination with the hi-gloss >

The Hendrix association ensures any Strat with its stylings rooted in '68 will be cool. This one sounds the part too

The Deluxe HSS features Vintage Noiseless pickups

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

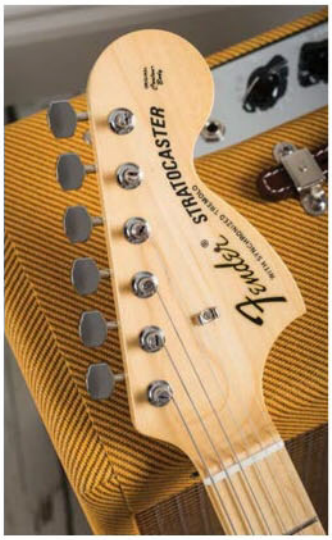
Fender Deluxe Strat HSS

The **Fender American Elite Series Stratocaster HSS Shawbucker** **£1,389-1,439** is the logical step up from the Mexican model here if you are looking for a highly-evolved HSS Strat with all the trimmings. The **American Standard Stratocaster HSS** starts at **£1,179** and is a fantastic workhorse. Shop around for great street and used prices.

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Fender Classic '68 Strat Texas Special

The **Fender Classic Series '70s Stratocaster** is **£689** in three-colour sunburst and you get a fuller, U-shape three-bolt neck and lower-output pickups. The **1967 Heavy Relic Stratocaster** **£2,969** may look as if it toured with Jimi, but it features a stealthy, player-friendly 9.5-inch radius round laminate fingerboard and 6105 frets. There's a Sea Foam Green finish that's to die for, too.



Note the Deluxe's contoured heel

finish, neatly installed vintage-gauge fretwire and 7.25-inch board radius make us feel a little like an ice-skating first-timer; compared to the big, stripped necks and flatter 'boards we've come to favour in recent years, this is slippery and it takes a short period of adjustment for us to feel sure-footed.

That said, once you get used to it, it's a lot of fun, aided by an excellent factory vibrato set-up that allows us to get quite wild while the tuning remains solid. As you might expect from the vintage 'board radius, there's a bit of fight above the 15th fret (which we like but some may not) even when strung with light strings, but choke-out is minimal – again, the excellent set-up makes all the difference.

We've grown so accustomed to relic finishes that it's now more arresting to see an instrument such as this – mirror-like finish, bright white plastics, unbroken fretboard edges an' all – but don't think that it doesn't have bags of 'play me' vibe. The inevitable Hendrix association ensures that any Stratocaster with its stylings rooted in '68 will always be cool, and this one sounds the part too; the hotter-than-vintage Texas Specials add a certain something, giving it a woody, expressive character that works really well with our tweed-y combo set to 'just breaking up' then pushed a little further with a J Rockett Archer.

If you can drag yourself away from Jimi-isms on the neck pickup for long enough to notice, the in-between settings on the five-way switch are hum-cancelling, the bridge and middle units are enjoyably raunchy and the electronics are exactly what you'd expect, although the taper of the volume control is rather dramatic, with most of the action happening between eight and 10.

Moving over to the Deluxe HSS and, though the neck is a fuller section of timber, after the fight offered by the '68, the Deluxe's much flatter board and 22 'Narrow Tall' frets make the string tension feel rubbery by comparison; bending the B string up a tone at the 12th fret causes the low E to drop a semitone, and the two-post vibrato bridge is considerably spongier in feel with a three-spring set-up than the Japanese guitar's vintage-style unit. It's a smoother ride, alright, particularly in higher registers thanks to the rounded-off heel, but a few of our favourite country-influenced bends are out of bounds.

The first-generation Noiseless pickups work as advertised, with less audible hum evident than when the bridge pickup is engaged. They are smoother sonically than the Texas Specials and a little lower in output, a little less explosive and a little more compressed. Flip to the bridge and the humbucker offers a chunky and versatile rock voice; engaging the S-1 switch deactivates the slug coil for a more vintage and typically Strat-like twang in positions one and two, complete with a little hum.

We found ourselves happiest using the Deluxe in 'regular' Strat mode with the S-1 switch engaged most of the time, switching the full humbucker in as a thickener and a boost as and when required for rockier passages. We were pleasantly surprised by the quality of those coil-split voices, and they certainly don't feel like a compromise in any way. Versatile but not bland, there's much to like here.

KEY FEATURES

Fender Deluxe Stratocaster HSS

- **PRICE** £679
- **DESCRIPTION** Double-cutaway solidbody, made in Mexico
- **BUILD** Alder body, bolt-on maple neck with satin polyurethane finish and 12" (305mm) radius rosewood fingerboard, 22 Narrow Tall frets, synthetic bone nut
- **HARDWARE** Deluxe cast/sealed locking tuners with vintage-style buttons, two-point synchronised vibrato bridge with bent-steel saddles
- **ELECTRICS** 1x Twin Head Vintage humbucker, 2x Vintage Noiseless single-coil pickups, master volume with S-1 switch, 2x tone, 5-position switch
- **SCALE LENGTH** 25.5" (648mm)
- **NECK WIDTH** 41.5mm at nut, 51.5mm at 12th fret
- **NECK DEPTH** 21mm at first fret, 22mm at 12th fret
- **STRING SPACING** 35mm at nut, 52mm at bridge
- **WEIGHT** 8.0lb/3.6kg
- **FINISHES** Tungsten (as reviewed) and Candy Apple Red w/rosewood 'board, Tobacco Sunburst and Blizzard Pearl w/ maple fingerboard

Guitar & Bass VERDICT

+ A versatile range of single-coil and humbucking tones
+ Excellent value for money considering the feature set
+ Well built and finished
+ Well behaved at high gain levels

- Gigbag included but a little flimsy

An excellent contemporary Stratocaster for the gigging player who needs to cover a variety of bases

9/10

KEY FEATURES

Fender Classic '68 Stratocaster Texas Special

- **PRICE** £729
- **DESCRIPTION** Double-cutaway solidbody, made in Japan
- **BUILD** Alder body, bolt-on maple neck with 'Slim C' profile, 7.25" (184.1mm) fingerboard radius, 21 vintage-style frets, synthetic bone nut
- **HARDWARE** 6-saddle vintage-style synchronised vibrato, cast/sealed vintage-style machineheads
- **ELECTRICS** 3x Fender Texas Special single-coil, 1x volume, 2x tone, 5-position blade pickup selector switch
- **SCALE LENGTH** 25.5" (648mm)
- **NECK WIDTH** 40mm at nut, 50mm at 12th fret
- **NECK DEPTH** 19mm at first fret, 21mm at 12th fret
- **STRING SPACING** 33mm at nut, 55mm at bridge
- **WEIGHT** 7.6lb/3.4kg
- **FINISH** Three-Colour Sunburst polyester gloss only
- **CONTACT** Fender UK & ROI 01342 331700 **www.fender.com**

Guitar & Bass VERDICT

+ Good build with a rock-solid set-up
+ After an initial adjustment period, the vintage board radius and slim neck are an engaging combination
+ Woody tones from the Texas Specials

- The expected noise issues
- No gigbag

For right-handed Jimi fans this is a vibe-y passport to the psychedelic era. A worthy addition to the range

8/10

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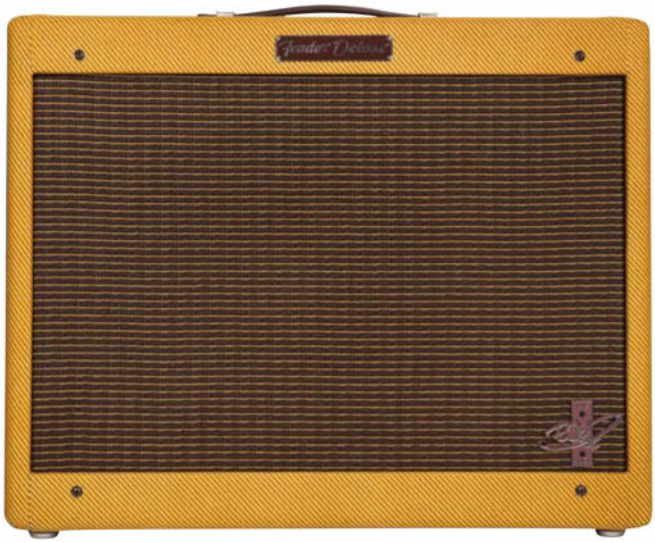


Fender The Edge Deluxe

Fender's latest Deluxe variant is tailored to The Edge's arena-sized preferences. Has **HUW PRICE** found what he's looking for?

U2's Edge is so closely associated with Vox AC30s, the very notion of an Edge signature tweed Deluxe may seem as incongruous as a Rory Gallagher signature Les Paul or a Kerry King signature Twin Reverb. If you have doubts, check out Fender's video demo featuring the man himself, and you may conclude it's actually a pretty decent fit.

In part, this must be down to Edge's preference for the Celestion Blue alnico speaker. No doubt this is a carry-over from his Vox amps, but many other 5E3 Deluxe fans have already concluded that it's the best-sounding speaker for this timeless circuit.

As well as adding its undeniable sonic charms, the Blue is more efficient than the alnico Jensens that were originally fitted to the 50s Deluxes and the reissue Jensen P12Q that was installed in Fender's '57 Deluxe reissue. This means a Blue-loaded Deluxe will have more clean headroom and it will be louder, so it's great to see Fender getting on board with probably the best 5E3 mod you can make.

Peeking inside reveals traditional vulcanised fibreboard, with eyelets and modern-spec components. None of the resistors look like carbon comps and the signal caps are film types. The tube complement includes a Ruby GZ34 rectifier, two Russian 6V6s and two Groove Tube 12AX7s. Back in the 50s, Fender used a lower gain 12AY7 in the first preamp stage and this amp's tube chart actually specifies a 12AY7 rather than a 12AX7. We'll revisit that one later...

The cabinet has a leather handle, and is made from solid pine coated with some type of toner for an aged (but not relic'd) look. The tweed covering has a lacquer coating and it looks a little more orangey amber than a vintage example might. Externally, the only departures from vintage spec are a nameplate with no reference to Fullerton; an Edge logo in the bottom right-hand corner of the speaker cloth; a metal cage for valve protection and insulating covers over the switches.

In Use

Something happened when I started testing this amp that may seem too good to be true. My mate Simon had sold a bunch of gear and treated himself to a 1959 5E3 Deluxe, along with a brand new Celestion Blue to replace the torn vintage Jensen. He asked me to install the speaker and give the amp a check over, so I had the Edge Signature reissue and an original to compare – both with brand-new Celestion Blue speakers. The results were revealing.

A Blue-loaded Deluxe will have more clean headroom and it will be louder than a Deluxe with alnico Jensens

With volume and tone set identically at half way up, it was >

KEY FEATURES

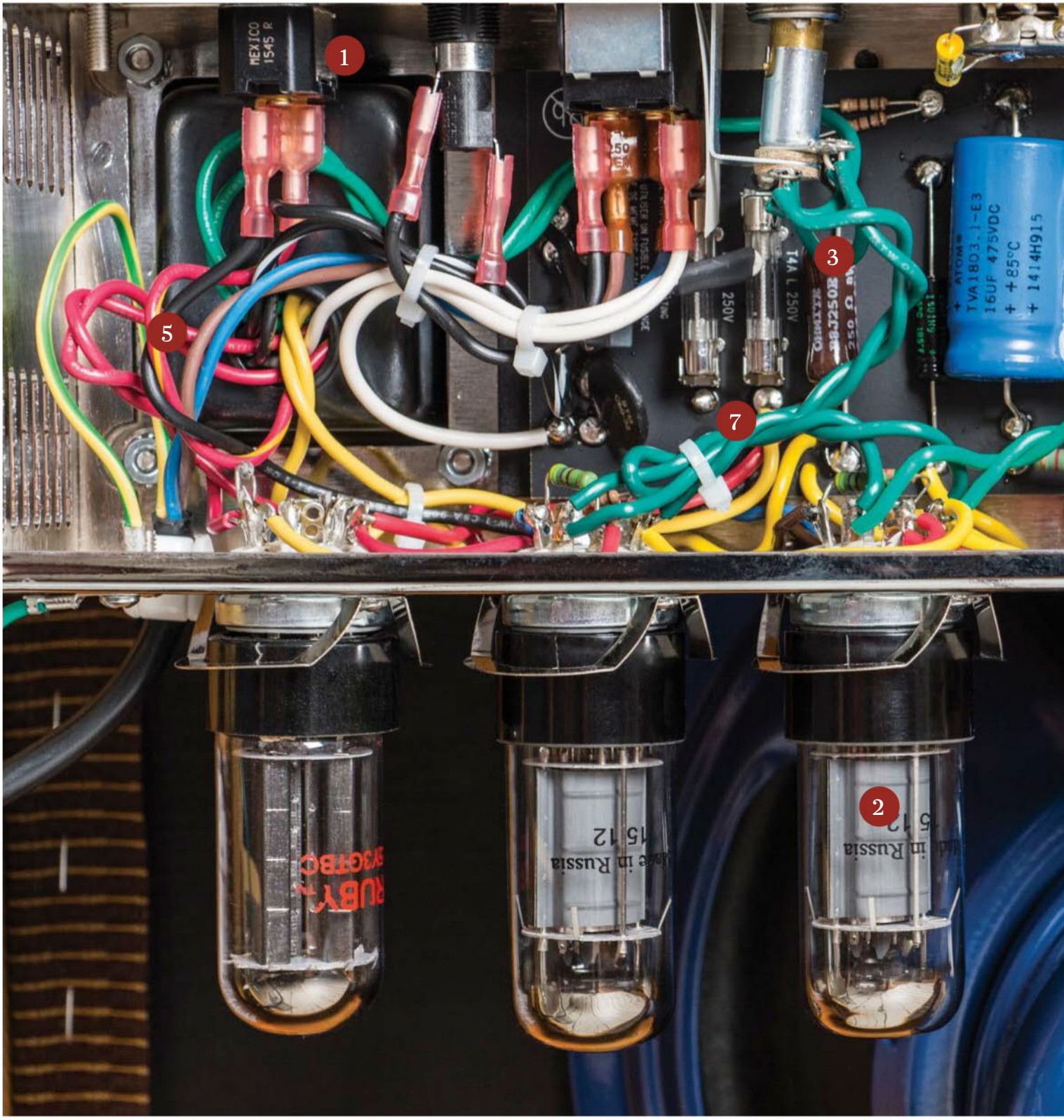
Fender The Edge Deluxe

- **PRICE** £1,739
- **DESCRIPTION** Two-channel, cathode-biased valve combo with extension speaker socket and finger-jointed pine cabinet, made in the USA
- **POWER RATING** 12W
- **VALVES** 2x 12AX7, 2x 6V6, 1x 5Y3GT
- **CONTROL PANEL** 4x input, 2x volume, tone, on/off, standby
- **SPEAKER** 1 x Celestion Blue alnico 12"
- **DIMENSIONS** 520x410x210mm
- **WEIGHT** 13.8kg/30.4lbs
- **CONTACT** Fender UK 01342 331700 **www.fender.com**

Anatomy of...

1 Running To Stand Still
The standby switch at the upper left wasn't a feature on 50s Deluxe amps, but it may prolong valve life and is a better option than the ground switch that would have occupied that position on the control panel

2 Sometimes You Can't Make It On Your Own
Détente is a wonderful thing. Here, we see Russian valves rocking out with Chinese valves and a British speaker, in this most American of amplifiers

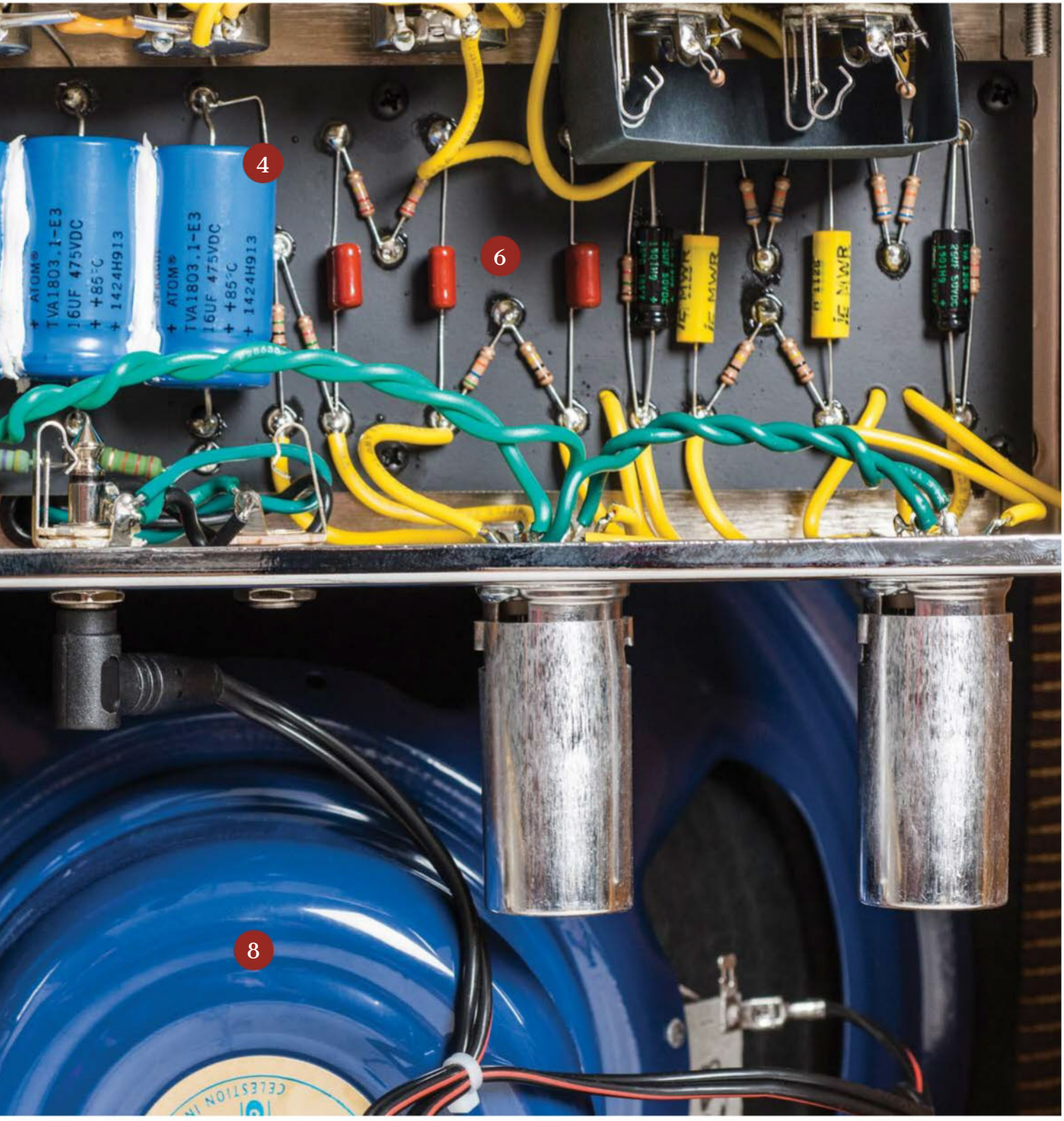


5 Trip Through Your Wires
Although modern Fender hookup wire has plastic insulation, the colour coding is the same as the old cloth wire

6 Rattle And Hum
No printed circuits here. This version of the 5E3 features vintage-style eyelets and fibreboard

3 The Electric Co
The big brown component below the pilot light is a 250-ohm bias resistor. This is true to vintage specs, but the plate voltage in this amp is way above 400v

4 With Or Without Blue
When tightening up the bass response of a 5E3, most modders beef up one or more of the filter capacitors. All three blue Sprague Atoms are vintage-spec 16uF capacitors



7 The Unforgettable Fire
The two fuses on the left of the circuit board are modern additions, but they're easy to access and replace if one of them blows

8 Bullet The Blue Sky
The Celestion Blue is the really big deal about this amp. If you're hell bent on authentic 50s tweed tone, you may not like it. But if you just want a speaker that brings out the best from this circuit, makes it louder, clearer and more generally useable, this is probably about as good as it gets

This logo plate is the only external evidence of the U2 man's endorsement

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...
For medium-power American amp tones, the 5E3 has ruled the roost for years and replicas are commonplace – often with a Celestion Blue already on board. Check out the **Lazy J J20 £2,200** and the **Gartone Bluesman £1,695**

obvious these amps have pretty much identical circuits and speakers. However, there were subtle tonal differences that may or may not be perceived as positive, depending on what you want from a tweed Deluxe.

The Edge version has a thicker and more compressed tone, with a little more weight in the low mids. The overdrive is rich and creamy, but it has enough grit and raucousness to retain those visceral tweedy thrills. In contrast, the vintage 5E3 is slightly less gainy and the lack of low-mid lift allows the mid frequencies to breathe more freely. The 50s model also sounds a little clearer, more open and less shrill.

The real differences become more apparent when you turn the volume down. With the old amp, the overdrive ebbs gently away to reveal delicate and shimmering clean tones with almost supernatural touch sensitivity.

Turning down the volume control on the Edge model obviously makes the amp quieter, but it doesn't really make much difference to the amount of overdrive. Coming at it from the other direction, the volume control ranges from one to 12. By the time the chicken head knob is pointing towards two, the Edge Deluxe is already overdriving quite heavily. All this happens with a Strat, so with a set of low-wind PAF replicas there's no clean headroom whatsoever.

As supplied, the review Edge amp did certain 5E3 things really well, but the novelty value of instant overdrive wore off pretty quickly. Fortunately, there's a solution – simply follow Fender's own advice on the tube chart and stick a 12AY7 in the first preamp valve position.

Having done that, I discovered just how good a 5E3 replica the Edge version really is. Gain became controllable, the clarity improved and the reduced compression enhanced the touch dynamics considerably. In fact, it sounded incredibly close to the 50s 5E3, which was actually running a 12AX7 for V1 throughout.

So why do these amps sound so different, when the speakers are identical and both are running modern rather than vintage valves? The power-valve bias components in the Edge model are vintage correct; however, the voltages are significantly higher. I read 440v on the 6V6 plates and well over 200v on the 12AX7 plates. The vintage Deluxe readings were 390v on the 6V6 plates and below 200v on the 12AX7 plates. Normally, I would associate higher voltages with more clean headroom but, as discussed, the Edge 5E3 didn't conform to expectations.

It's doubtful Edge has completely abandoned his AC30s, so maybe he uses those for his cleaner tones and uses his tweed Deluxe for overdrive. If that's the case, running a 12AX7 in the front end makes sense. However, if you would prefer to explore the full range of tweed tones, there are two ways to do it.

Firstly, you could perform that simple valve swap – or secondly, you can play with the Edge 5E3 cranked up and your guitar volume turned down. So long as you have a treble-bleed capacitor, you'll get all the breathy jangle and ringing chime you need, and this version of the 5E3 reveals its considerable hidden charms and tonal versatility.

All things considered, Fender has come up with a great-sounding twist on the 5E3 formula and, by associating itself with such a big-name player, has been able to bypass vintage correctness and make the mods and upgrades necessary to compete with the boutique boys. Considering it comes pre-loaded with an expensive Celestion Blue, the street price is very competitive. It undercuts much of the boutique competition and as a Fender product, it should retain its value pretty well.

Guitar & Bass VERDICT

+ Glorious overdrive
+ Harmonically rich and responsive tone
+ Properly constructed
+ Significant speaker upgrade
+ Lightweight and loud
+ Comes with vintage-style cover

- Non-vintage volume-control taper restricts clean applications

Fans of The Edge's cleaner tones may need to look elsewhere, but the Celestion Blue is a fantastic upgrade and this is a very fine-sounding take on the 5E3 Deluxe

8/10

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Martin OOOX1SAE Westside Custom Edition X Series #1

Martin's UK distributor Westside has commissioned an exclusive run of X Series models. **HUW PRICE** tests the OOO-size #1 model

An increasing trend over the last few years has seen car companies reinterpreting classic and well-loved designs by repackaging them with new materials, updated bodies and all mod cons. Something about this Martin puts me in mind of the new Mini, Beetle, Fiat 500 or Alfa Romeo Giulietta.

Inevitably, this design approach can have positive and negative consequences. Modern interpretations of classic cars may not have quite the same charm, but the advantages include a lesser likelihood of bits falling off, mechanical failure or physical harm! In acoustic-guitar terms, you can expect improved tuning stability, more accurate intonation, rock-solid neck joints and perhaps some interesting new materials and finishes. This Martin #1 is a perfect example.

The only parts on this guitar that could be considered 'traditional' are the solid-mahogany top, the spruce braces and the wood kerfing. So let's start by taking a look at the back and sides.

The material used is what Martin calls a High Pressure Laminate, which is made from wood particles pressed together under high heat. Through the soundhole, the HPL looks a bit like Formica, but the outside surface is solid black, with a slight texture that's not unlike unsanded lacquer. It's a fine match for the fingerboard and bridge – both made from a high-pressure paper-based composite called Richlite, which could pass easily for ebony. Compared to solid wood, or more traditional wood laminates, the HPL has very little tap tone. It's actually more of a muted 'boink'. The headstock overlay is HPL, too. Whether or not this look appeals will depend on personal taste. Some players may appreciate the clean, modern vibe and the juxtaposition of a black finish with organic materials; others may feel that the textured black is uncomfortably reminiscent of mid-80s fibreglass bowl-backs.

With its easy action, high-quality pickup and feedback resistance, this would make a very practical, enjoyable gigging electro. It certainly plays like a pedigree

I've always liked the look of Martin's Stratabond laminate necks. They're formed from multiple layers of multi-coloured wood laminates, with the glue lines running lengthways. In addition to saving money, and being an advantage with the increasing scarcity of tropical hardwoods, this bonded approach produces extremely stable necks and creates a nice visual effect where the heel is carved across the layers. At the opposite end, the angle at which the headstock is cut exposes three join lines that more or less line up with the tuners. It's a neat touch.

The top finish is described as 'hand rubbed'. What that means is the mahogany is sealed and protected by a clear matt finish that is wiped on by hand. It's actually urethane varnish, which retains the wood's natural colour as well as a bare-wood feel. The nut and compensated saddle are both synthetic and the bridge pins are black plastic. The only decoration is some black-and-white binding material in the rosette and the Martin logo on the die-cast tuners. Tucked under the soundhole, you'll find the volume and tone controls for a Fishman Sonitone preamp linked to an undersaddle piezo pickup.

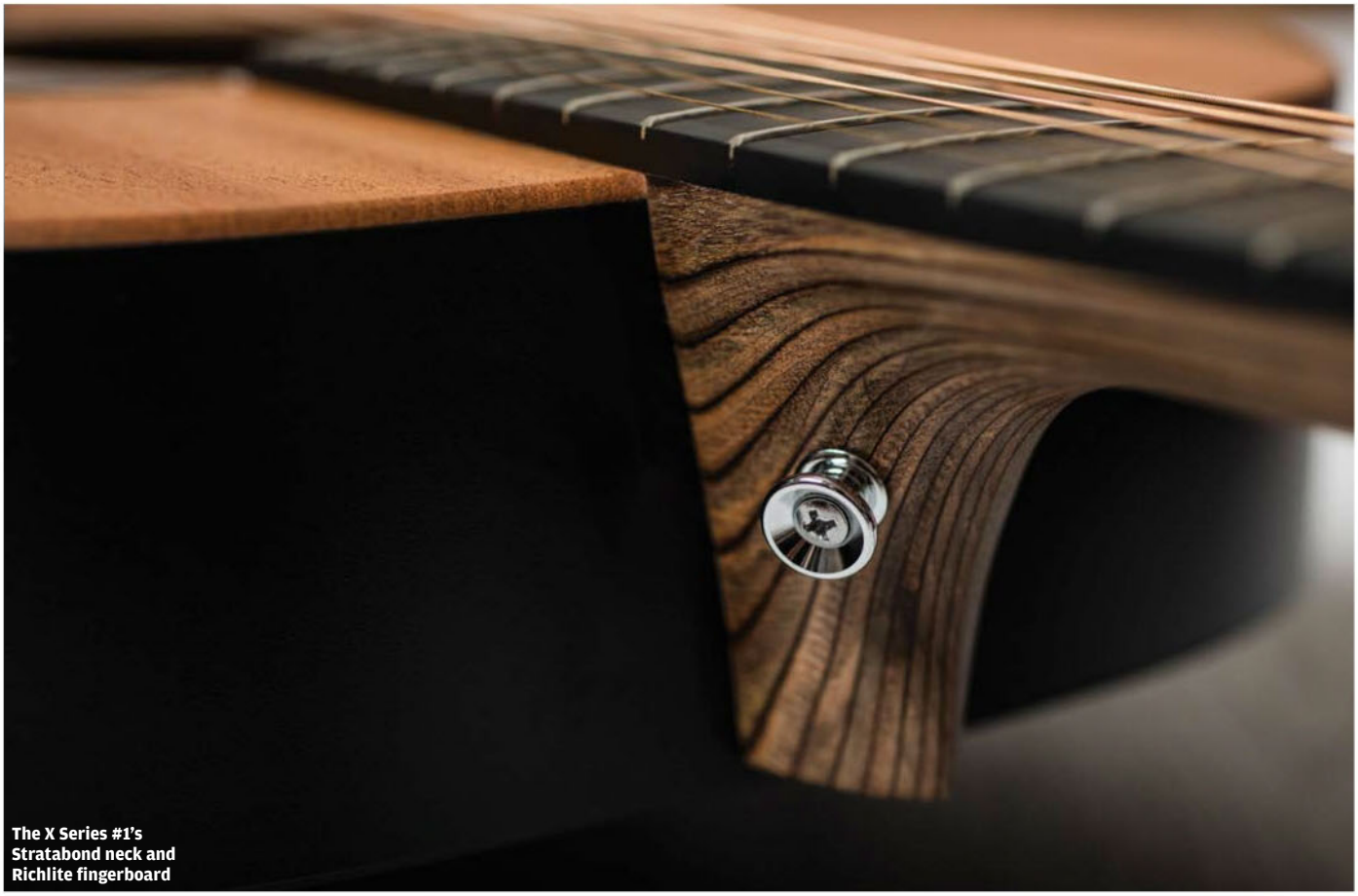
In use

Although the #1 weighs about average for a guitar of its size with cast tuners, I suspect the body might be a bit lighter than usual and the neck a tad weightier. When played seated, the #1 feels a bit neck-heavy. This aside, the neck profile feels good, despite the slightly >

KEY FEATURES

Martin OOOX1SAE Westside Custom Edition X Series #1

- **PRICE** £599
- **DESCRIPTION** Electro-acoustic guitar, made in Mexico
- **BUILD** Solid sapele top, High Pressure Laminate back and sides, bolt-on Stratabond laminated neck, Richlite bridge and 20-fret Richlite fingerboard, plastic bridge pins, synthetic nut and compensated saddle
- **HARDWARE** Martin-branded sealed tuners
- **SCALE LENGTH** 644mm/25 3/8"
- **NECK WIDTH** 43mm at nut, 54mm at 12th fret
- **NECK DEPTH** 20mm at first fret, 22mm at ninth fret
- **STRING SPACING** 37mm at nut, 54.5mm at bridge
- **WEIGHT** 1.9kg/4.1lbs
- **LEFT-HANDERS** No
- **FINISH** Matt body & satin neck with black back & sides
- **CONTACT** Westside Distribution 01412 484812 **www.martinguitar.com**



The X Series #1's Stratabond neck and Richlite fingerboard

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

An obvious alternative with a solid-wood top and synthetic back and sides would be an Ovation, such as the **Ovation 1627VL-4 £801** non-cutaway electro-acoustic. Alternatively, an all-solid jatoba-wood **Andrew White Cybele 100J** costs **£500** and **Breedlove**'s **Passport Parlor MH £576** has a solid-mahogany top, laminated-mahogany back and sides and a Fishman ISYS+ pickup system.

uneven surface, and the fretwork is excellent. It certainly plays like a pedigree instrument.

There's a fairly solid and well-defined bass, with about as much weight as you could expect from a body of this size. When you palm-mute, you can get a satisfyingly percussive thrum, and when you allow the low notes to ring out, sustain isn't too bad, but after a period it decays rapidly.

There's a fairly solid, well-defined bass with as much weight as you could expect from a body of this size. Palm-mute and you get a satisfylingly percussive thrum

This carries across the strings evenly and the overall vibe is clear and lively, but not especially loud. The #1 handles picking and strumming with ease, but after you've been playing for a few minutes, it might begin to dawn on you that you've discovered all there is to know about this guitar and it's unlikely to surprise you.

Although the tone is decent enough and fairly enjoyable, there's something a bit dry and two-dimensional about it. When playing an all-solid acoustic, or even one with high-quality laminated back and sides, you may have noticed how certain notes and harmonics ring on inside the body after you've released the note. This 'natural reverb' is absent completely from the #1. If you play a chord then dampen it quickly, it stops stone dead. That, combined with the lack of tap tone from the back, would lead me to conclude that only the top is contributing to sound generation.

Since that top is sapele, excessive treble is avoided, but harmonic overtones are somewhat limited. So the #1's acoustic tone compares with an all-solid mahogany acoustic, much like some mp3s can compare with CDs. On the surface it's pretty good, but when you listen carefully, you may notice a certain something is missing.

Does the piezo tone fare any better? Fortunately, it does and I really liked the plugged-in performance of the #1 from the get-go. The tone control has a nicely progressive response and the body seems fairly resistant to feedback. However, through a flat-response preamp, the G and D strings sounded a little quieter than the others, so you may want to employ additional EQ.

Ultimately, Martin makes plenty of instruments designed to deliver superlative acoustic performance, and if unplugged tone is your priority, you may want to look elsewhere in the catalogue. Where the #1 succeeds, however, is as a highly capable and affordable stage electro with an iconic name on its headstock.

I like the looks, and the materials used should ensure that this is more robust and road-proof than many solid- and laminated-wood instruments. So, with its easy action, high-quality pickup and feedback resistance, it would make a very practical, enjoyable gigging guitar.

Guitar & Bass VERDICT

+ Crisply defined bass
+ Good string-to-string balance
+ Easy playability
+ Decent-sounding pickup
+ Effective feedback resistance
+ Striking contemporary looks

- Restrained unplugged performance
- Rather two-dimensional acoustic sound quality

A well-made guitar with striking looks and a fine-sounding pickup system, that does the business as a stage electro

7/10

ehx loopers

The 45000 is a 4-track powerhouse SUPER LOOPER with a console-style layout for intuitive control. Each loop features four tracks and it delivers unlimited standard, reverse and variable speed overdubbing, speed control, stereo loop recording and much more. This looping tour de force also syncs to MIDI clock and saves directly to SD Cards.

Optional external Foot Controller.

The 22500 Dual Stereo Looper's loops can be locked to each other or run independently in free form. It lets you do verse/chorus switching in Sequential mode, or two-loop simultaneous playback in Parallel mode. A phantom-powered mic input adds convenience. The compact 22500 also includes 16 Drum/Rhythm tracks, or import your own!

Optional external Foot Controller.

With 12 minutes of stereo loop recording on 10 banks that remain in memory until you erase them, plus unlimited Standard, Reverse and ½ Speed overdubbing and an adjustable Fade Out mode, the 720 Stereo Looper packs plenty of power in a compact pedalboard friendly design.

Boasting 6 minutes of looping time, the super-affordable 360 lets you record, store and recall 11 loops. Single footswitch control of record, erase, undo-redo and unlimited overdubbing, plus a compact size and easy-to-use functionality, complete the picture.

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Left: **Pro Tools' Edit window – showing tracks, automation and transport control**

Avid Pro Tools 12

The new version of Avid's Pro Tools DAW is chasing the hearts and minds of guitar players everywhere. **MARCUS LEADLEY** finds out more

So why is Pro Tools 12 good news for guitarists? For many of you, the big news will be the introduction of a cut-down but fully functional free version – Pro Tools First – which offers 16 audio tracks (stereo or mono), 16 virtual-instrument tracks and 16 MIDI tracks. It's capable of four-channel simultaneous input and it comes with the Xpand2 multitimbral music synth, so you can get creative with your backing tracks. And there are over 20 effects, sound processors and utility plug-ins. Realistically, it will meet the needs of many players who like to develop, record and layer parts and it's an ideal way to check out Pro Tools. What's the catch? Well, the only way to store work is on the cloud on Avid servers. This is good, because you can access projects on any computer, but you're limited to three free projects at a time. If you need more storage, you'll be able to purchase it, and Pro Tools First will support cloud collaboration.

In use

If you're encountering digital audio for the first time, the learning curve can be daunting. However, the Pro Tools user interface is both powerful and transparent. Whether you're using Pro Tools First or Pro Tools 12, you'll be presented with two main windows: a Mixer page, which that looks a lot like an analogue mixer and gives you an overview of tracks, levels, inputs, outputs, busses and plug-ins; and an Edit window, where the recorded audio is displayed in graphic form. Here, you can undertake cut, copy and paste editing and draw in automation for things such as level and pan. The edit window also has a transport mechanism and you have obvious, play, record, stop, rewind and fast-forward controls.

Learning digital audio can be daunting, but the Pro Tools user interface is both powerful and transparent

If you're a seasoned user or returning after a break, the good news is that Pro Tools 12 retains the look and character of earlier iterations. This applies to the basic suite of plug-ins, as well. The majority of the changes under the hood are to do with workflow. The first thing you'll notice is the new Dashboard that appears on start up. This replaces the Quick Start dialogue box, which always felt somewhat under-designed. The Dashboard is a slick window that allows you to open existing sessions or create new ones – and guitar-oriented song templates have been created to get you up and running in no time. Next, there's a new Metadata Inspector window. This will be particularly useful if you're sharing sessions and collaborating. Metadata is the information that's stored as part of the .ptx file: information about contributors, sample rates, bit depth, BPM and so on.

Pro Tools 12 also sees some significant development in terms of input/output/bus capability. These changes will mainly benefit people working on very large sessions (unlimited bus paths), or with multi-channel formats. If you want to go large, Pro Tools 12 now supports 128 audio tracks (working at 48kHz) and 512 instrument tracks. A number of features migrate from Pro Tools HD to Pro Tools 12. These include the ability to create VCA master tracks, so you can control groups of tracks more efficiently; and 17 different metering options.

Another useful feature is Track Commit. This allows you to render a track along with its plug-ins, virtual instrument or automation data. This frees up DSP power and also enables you to collaborate with people who don't have the same instrument/plug-in suite. And, of course, you can return to the un-rendered version to make changes. 12.4 added Track Freeze, which is even simpler to use; there's a new snowflake icon on the track lane of the edit page. You don't necessarily have >

KEY FEATURES

Avid Pro Tools 12

- **PRICE** (inclusive of VAT): Pro Tools First: free. Pro Tools 12: perpetual licence £478.80; annual subscription £238.80; monthly subscription £22.80; Pro Tools annual upgrade plan £82.80. Many other options and permutations availalble; see website for further details
- **DESCRIPTION** Digital Audio Workstation (DAW). Current version 12.5. Mixer and Edit windows, MIDI editor, Sibelius score editor, video track and much more. Supports 128 audio tracks at 48kHz (96kHz = 64; 192kHz = 32), 512 instrument tracks, 512 MIDI tracks, 128 auxiliary tracks. Unlimited busses. Up to 32-channel simultaneous recording (hardware dependent). Support for AAX Native and AAX Audio Suite plug-ins. Comes complete with over 60 virtual instruments, effects, sound processors and utility plug-ins
- **CONTACT** www.avid.com/uk

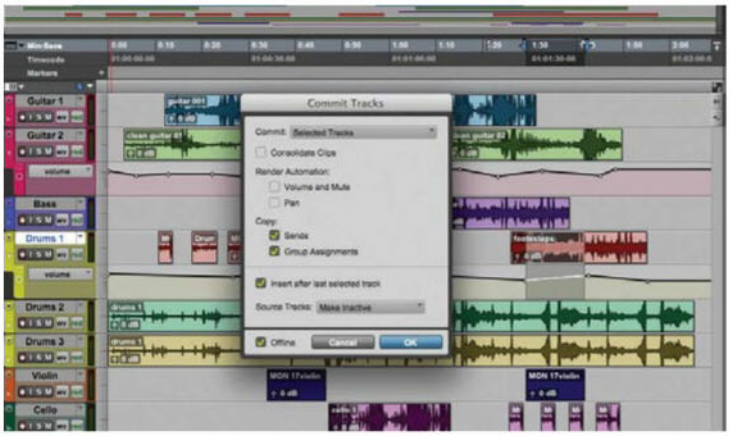
- **MINIMUM SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS**

Mac
OS X 10.8.5
Intel Core i5 processor
4GB RAM (8GB required for video playback)

Windows
Intel PC with Windows 7 64-bit (Home Premium, Professional and Ultimate Editions) or Windows 8/8.1 (Standard and Pro Editions)
Intel Core i5 processor
4GB RAM (8GB or more required for video playback)

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

There's a lot of competition, and the convergence of DAW design over the last 15 years means most offer similar tools and features. For musicians, **Logic Pro X £149** pretty much slugs it out with Pro Tools on a feature-by-feature basis. **Cubase Pro 8.5 £406** offers a range of highly advanced audio and MIDI features. There's also **Cubase Artist £221** for those simply recording and mixing music, and an entry-level version, **Cubase Elements 8 £73**. **Digital Performer 9 £287** is fully featured and produced by MOTU. **Reaper** from Cockos is the new kid on the block and offers a 60-day free trial. If you earn less than $20,000 from your music(!), the licence is just $60. And if you're a Mac user, **GarageBand** comes as an integral part of the iLife suite or as a free download.



Above: **Pro Tools Mixer window – showing tracks, I/O, and plug-ins**
Right: **Edit window showing new 'commit track' window**

to freeze all inserts, and you can freeze aux and instrument tracks, too.

Edit-window performance has also been improved; now, whenever you overlap tracks, the region takes on a translucent appearance which allows easy visual alignment of waveforms. This makes comping guitar parts extremely easy. Another development is the way fades are handled. You can now create presets for fade ins, fade outs, crossfades, and batch fades.

Pro Tools 12 also facilitates a bunch of new online features. Installing Pro Tools 12 automatically installs the Avid Application Manager. This will alert you to software upgrades and it allows you to download and seamlessly update. It also lets you know when you need to renew a Pro Tools subscription or upgrade/support plan. Want to upgrade to Eleven MKII ($49), so you can access 33 great guitar and bass amps? All you have to do now is fire up Avid Marketplace from the upper menu bar. Browse, pay, download, install and off you go – without even having to restart.

Finally, with 12.5, we have the introduction of cloud collaboration. There's a new set of options in Pro Tools, which lets you create and store projects in the cloud and work on them with other people, either in near-real time or using an offline/update approach. Collaborators can be anywhere in the world, or just in their studio across town. These can be musicians or producers you already know, or people you meet via the new online Artist Community – which you access using Pro Tools' new chat window. This feature could be a real game changer in terms of a guitarist's workflow, but only time will tell. For a session player, for example, it could potentially facilitate an entirely new, global presence. No other DAW currently offers a similar facility. While the collaborative tools are straightforward to describe (new icons and new drop-down menu options), the workflow itself would, realistically, take more pages that we can devote to the task. To put this in context, Avid has created six online video tutorials covering cloud collaboration.

Will this be for you? Well, you can check it out for free, as all Pro Tools 12 users can run up to three cloud projects for free (500MB storage).

Purchasing Pro Tools

Pro Tools 12 heralds a new set of subscription, upgrade and support options as an alternative to the good ol' perpetual licence – check the site for full details. If you buy the annual upgrade and support plan, you'll also get a bundle of free All Access plug-ins as a sweetener, many of which are stompbox-style guitar effects: Space, BBD Delay, Black Op Distortion, Black Shiny Wah, Black Spring, C1 Chorus/Vibrato, DC Distortion, Flanger, Gray Compressor, Green JRC Overdrive, Orange Phaser, Roto Speaker, Studio Reverb, Tape Echo, Tri-Knob Fuzz, Vibe Phaser and White Boost. If you're a student or teacher (with institutional affiliation), Avid is offering some very good discounts – academic options include upgrades, technical support and bonus plug-ins.

5 reasons why Pro Tools is a great choice for guitarists

1. The only DAW for which there is a dedicated guitar modelling/interface solution: Eleven Rack. Develop sounds in the studio and take the unit to practices and gigs. Use it for recording, reamping, as an effects processor, direct to a PA or with a power amp and a cab.
2. Guitar-oriented session templates are available for creating new songs on startup.
3. Ships with Eleven Lite (2 amp/cab options – fully featured Eleven Mk II plug-in available) and Sans Amp PSA-1 for DI recording.
4. Free All Access stompbox-style guitar effect plugins.
5. Comping tracks using Playlist view is really too easy. Multiple takes are all laid out in front of you – solo your takes, select the best bits, press the up arrow and the section is automatically promoted to the main playlist

Guitar & Bass VERDICT

+ Powerful, fully featured composing, recording, editing and mastering software
+ Basics are easy to learn
+ Subscription-based or permanent licence ownership model

- Updating now requires you to buy an ongoing plan
- Many competing DAWs cost less
- If you've not upgraded since Pro Tools 10, all your existing plug-ins will need updating)

Pro Tools has earned its reputation by being an excellent digital-audio workstation. Basic recording, mixing and editing tasks are easy to master and it's hugely powerful if you want to go deeper. Many of the changes ushered in with the release of Pro Tools 12 directly benefit new users and the availability of a free version is great news. If the cloud collaboration aspect really establishes itself and the link to the Avid Marketplace delivers, Pro Tools could become a one-stop shop for creating, promoting and licensing your music.

9/10

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Guitar AWARD CHOICE 9/10

DigiTech Ventura Vibe

DigiTech's latest stomper offers three flavours of chewy modulation in one compact box... **RICHARD PURVIS** picks up some heavy vibes

What fools we are. We spend all our time and money trying to get our guitars sounding as pure and perfect as a freshly ironed wimple, then go and garble them up with modulation effects. Maybe that's why DigiTech put an image of a medieval fool on the top of the Ventura Vibe.

Of course, there's nothing wrong with a bit of 'garblage', and the vibe effect – not pure pitch vibrato, but somewhere between the sweet wibble of a chorus pedal, the vocal throb of a fast phaser and the woozy swirl of a Leslie rotary speaker – can be a real song-lifter. The original Shin-ei Uni-Vibe was intended as a rotary speaker simulator, but didn't quite nail it; thus, a whole new effect category was born by accident. This digital unit offers two variants on the Uni-Vibe sound – vintage and modern – plus a fresh stab at the Leslie thing. It has stereo outputs, and we'll be making use of them for maximum immersion.

There are also a couple of other features that recall dedicated rotary sims such as the wondrous Neo Ventilator: onboard overdrive and a speed-ramping feature accessed by holding your foot down on the footswitch. Other than that, you get controls for speed, depth, mix and tone... and no battery compartment; you'll need a nine-volt power supply to feed that greedy digital processor.

In use

Leaving the drive at zero for now, we'll kick off in vintage mode with the other dials at halfway. It's vintage alright – like an asymmetrical phaser with a deeply liquid quality. Pushing the mix past halfway reduces the tonal sweep, emphasising the pitch-changing vibrato aspect; the other controls behave as you'd expect, offering a wide range of sounds. Dialling in some drive thickens things up in a nicely musical way, but if you want to replicate Jimi's Uni-Vibe sound from Woodstock, you'll need a fuzzbox (plus a couple of Marshall stacks and a big field).

Flicking over to the modern setting, the first thing we hear is a second or so of silence – don't do this mid-song. Then, we get a more bright and chorus-like sound, quite flange-y at low speeds, and with even-more-pronounced pitch wobble when you crank the depth and mix knobs. Rotary has a more gentle, almost mid-scooped voice, and here's where the tone control might be useful for bringing out the top end. The effect itself is pretty good clean and gets more interesting when you push the drive – it really has that Leslie grind, and will get you very, very close to the *Badge* sound.

The stereo effect works well in all three modes, and so does the ramping feature: keep your foot on the switch and the modulation will wind up quickly to maximum speed, then slow down as soon as you lift off.

All in all, the Ventura Vibe is a fun pedal to use, with three highly creative effects, plus useful acceleration and overdrive features.

This digital unit offers two variants on the Uni-Vibe sound – vintage and modern – plus a stab at the Leslie thing

Guitar VERDICT

+ Three distinct effects, all of them tasty
+ Clever acceleration feature is a real asset
+ ...and so is the overdrive
- May not cut it for Leslie simulator connoisseurs
- No battery option

Don't be put off by the scary jester, this pedal is a three-part festival of modulation fun

9/10

KEY FEATURES

DigiTech Ventura Vibe

- **PRICE** £143
- **DESCRIPTION** Digital vibe/rotary pedal, made in China
- **CONTROLS** Speed, depth, mix, tone, drive; vintage/modern/rotary mode switch; bypass footswitch with 'hold to speed up' feature; 9V power input, mono/stereo inputs and outputs
- **CONTACT** Sound Technology 01462 480000 **www.soundtech.co.uk** **www.digitech.com**

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

The **TC Electronic Viscous Vibe £114** offers a huge range of vibe/chorus effects with clever TonePrint deep editing. Both the **Electro-Harmonix Good Vibes £90** and the **Pigtronix Quantum Time Modulator £199** are analogue options with switchable chorus/vibrato modes.

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Guitar & Bass AWARD EXCELLENCE 10/10

Wudtone CP Vintage Tremolo

Can an S-type 'tremolo' emulate the tuning stability of a Floyd Rose without changing the looks or tone? **HUW PRICE** tests the Wudtone...

The basic operating principle of Leo Fender's vibrato design was just fine, but over the decades, various attempts have been made to refine it. Some have been more successful than others and it is argued that Fender's original version sounds best because the front of the bridge plate remains in contact with the body: base plates with knife-edge pivots tend to float above.

Andy Preston of Wudtone is both a guitarist and a trained engineer, so he has combined his experience in both fields to improve the feel, stability and sound of the Strat 'trem'. Wudtone bridge plates come in two varieties – the CP Vintage has traditional looks and materials, while the Holy Grail is made from higher tensile steel for increased dynamic efficiency and sustain. The point where the strings emerge from the block and wrap over through the saddle is a common breaking point. Wudtone plates are milled to form a string-friendly curve.

Observe a regular vibrato in action and you'll notice how the front of the plate slides down the retaining screws as the trem is dipped. This occurs because the rear of the screw head fouls against the plate. Wudtone plates have angled recesses for the screw head, which allow the plate to pivot against the screws, rather than slide. To enhance bridge-to-body contact, Wudtone uses a 0.5mm stainless-steel whacker plate under the bridge plate. Like the screw recesses, it's virtually invisible when installed and Wudtone claims improved feel and tone.

Lastly, there's the 1018 Cold Steel Block. It's virtually identical to a pre-CBS Fender block, but Wudtone employs a nylon bush to eliminate slack. The block comes with a 5mm stainless-steel arm, because regular arms won't fit.

Wudtone sells the bridge plate, whacker plate and block individually, along with complete units that include springs and a claw. Various sizes and options are available for vintage reissues, plus American-, Far Eastern- and Mexican-made instruments and customised string spacing.

Sounds

Fitting the whacker plate is quick and easy, and it doesn't require string removal. Simply slacken the strings and hold them with a capo to maintain the tuner-post wraps. Then remove the springs and the six screws at the front of the bridge plate. Lift the vibrato assembly out, position the whacker plate, then reinstall the screws, springs and tune up.

I noticed a tiny bit more definition and clarity along with a lighter feel. It's hard to describe, but everything felt slightly freer and smoother. Since the bridge sits a little higher, you will need to lower the saddles to compensate.

Next, I installed the plate and block assembly. I didn't perceive any change in tone, but considering I was replacing a pre-CBS bridge and saddles, that can be regarded as an accolade. However, the Wudtone made my Strat's tuning more stable than ever.

The Wudtone made my Strat's tuning more stable than ever... It takes the original design to its logical conclusion

Wudtone makes some bold claims, but they're all fully justified. It's an upgrade that appears bone-stock unless you look at it very closely... but is it an improvement? It most certainly is.

Guitar & Bass VERDICT

+ Very nicely engineered
+ Maintains vintage looks
+ Remarkable tuning stability
+ No routing or drilling necessary
+ Cost-effective upgrade
+ Fits every type of Stratocaster

- Absolutely nothing

A very well thought out and beautifully made product that takes the original Fender vibrato-unit design to its logical conclusion, without compromising looks or tone.

10/10

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

If you want something completely different, check out the **Stetsbar S-Style £175** with its Bigsby-meets-Strat look and feel. Callaham is renowned for its high-quality hardware. The **Callaham Vintage S Model Assembly £109** will be an upgrade on most factory vibratos, but it's built just like the originals and will have all the usual issues and limitations.

KEY FEATURES

Wudtone CP Vintage Tremolo

- **PRICE** Complete assemblies from £119.99
- **DESCRIPTION** Vintage-style vibrato assembly with refinements to improve tone, feel and tuning stability. Made in Wales
- **CONTACT** Wudtone 01291 671515 www.wudtone.com

500/8 CONTEMPORARY

Höfner Verythin HCT 500/8 Long Scale Bass

Ultra-slim with long-scale punch, does this four-string offer the best of both worlds? **CHRIS VINNICOMBE** gets low...

Höfner basses are synonymous with Paul McCartney, but this new, long-scale Verythin is a different animal to both its fully-hollow 60s namesake and the similarly-spec'd 30-inch scale 500/1 Violin Bass with which Macca helped propel The Beatles to fame.

Featuring a semi-hollow body with a laminated-maple top, back and sides and a solid spruce centre-block, the Verythin Long Scale has a chunky dependability and a reassuring medium weight. The strings are anchored via a tune-o-matic-style bridge and stop tailpiece, so the strapped-on feel is a world away from the white-knuckle ride of using a Violin Bass with a floating bridge on a sweaty club stage.

The slim, fast maple/beech/maple neck doesn't feel as unwieldy as some long-scale basses can (especially to those of us who are primarily guitarists), and while it's slightly neck-heavy, in a playing position your right forearm rests on the 1.25-inch body edge and acts as a natural balance. The bound headstock may say 'Contemporary Series' on the truss-rod cover but the Dark Cherry transparent sunburst finish, large f-holes and little touches such as the pearloid heel inlay and flame-maple neck give this enough of an old-school Höfner flavour to ensure that it wouldn't be out of place in a 50s or 60s covers band – and that's exactly the context in which we road-tested it.

In use

Where a traditionally appointed Verythin or Violin Bass can be a little woolly and stylistically limited – especially with flats – this long-scale semi, strung with roundwounds, is capable of spanning several decades of bass tone. The punchy back pickup can sound quite modern if you need it to, but while the centre-block minimises feedback and adds a pseudo-solidbody push, there's still a pleasingly vintage-sounding woody thump.

Experimentation with the individual pickup volume controls yields a number of sweet spots with varying degrees of softness and definition. Try the classic trick of damping the strings with a piece of foam down by the bridge if you want to accentuate the retro vibe – it works brilliantly for everything from pseudo-upright walking lines to James Jamerson and 'Duck' Dunn-inspired soul grooves. As you might expect, if it's Paul you need, the Verythin handles Beatles basslines pretty well, too.

For our money, the Verythin Long Scale is an excellent choice for bassists whose tastes include 1950s rock 'n' roll, old-school R&B, 60s beat, psychedelia, indie-rock and even early 70s funk. Our only concerns are some slightly lumpy finishing around the f-holes and the fact that the potentiometers aren't very well anchored to the top, but the former isn't a deal breaker, the latter is a relatively easy fix and in all other areas, we're mightily impressed.

The strapped-on feel is a world away from the white-knuckle ride of using a Violin Bass with a floating bridge

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

If you fancy a more traditional version of the Verythin with a 30-inch scale, the **Höfner HCT 500/7 Verythin Bass £699** has authentic 60s stylings and a spruce centre-block. **Epiphone**'s **Jack Casady Signature Bass £619** has a 34-inch scale and comes in Metallic Gold or Ebony, while the **Hagstrom Viking Short Scale Bass £649** has a 30.75-inch scale length and retro appointments.

Guitar VERDICT

+ Excellent tones, looks the part
+ Has the push of a long-scale bass, but not as cumbersome to handle
- Pots could be fastened more securely
- No gigbag or case included

An excellent and affordable choice for the retro-inclined bassist, with a vintage vibe and a versatile range of tones

9/10

KEY FEATURES

Höfner Verythin HCT 500/8 Long Scale Bass

- **PRICE** £659
- **DESCRIPTION** Long-scale electric four-string bass, made in China
- **BUILD** Double-cutaway laminated maple semi-hollow body with spruce centre-block, three-piece maple/beech/maple set neck with bound rosewood fretboard, dot inlays, 22 frets, plastic nut
- **ELECTRICS** 2x chrome-covered humbucking pickups, 2x volume, 2x tone
- **HARDWARE** Nickel tuners, adjustable bridge and stop tailpiece
- **SCALE LENGTH** 864mm/34inches
- **NECK WIDTH** 42mm at nut, 52mm at 12th fret
- **NECK DEPTH** 20mm at first fret, 22mm at 12th fret
- **STRING SPACING** 33mm at nut, 55mm at bridge
- **WEIGHT** 7.8lb/3.5kg
- **LEFT-HANDERS** No, but several Violin Bass models are available as lefties
- **FINISHES** Dark Cherry transparent sunburst only
- **CONTACT** Barnes & Mullins 01691 652449 **www.hofner-guitars.com**

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Two-Rock are incredible sounding, hand built boutique guitar amps, made in Rohnert Park, California. New 2016 model the Two Rock Cardiff is now in stock. Come and check out this great new amp, as well as the full lineup of other Two Rock models.

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Blackstar Fly 3 Bass Stereo Pack

The Brit amp maker blew our minds with the tiny, yet brilliant Fly 3 guitar combo. **GARETH MORGAN** checks out the new bass version

After the success of its tiny Fly 3 guitar combo, released in late 2014, Blackstar has unleashed a bass version – the company's first bass amp no less – on an unsuspecting public.

As the Fly 3 Bass is carved from the same template, most of the unit's development, which took about six months, related to tweaking the preamp and its cosmetic appearance. The F3B is made in China using a thermoplastic polymer called ABS, the structure of which is designed to have an acoustic response similar to a wooden cabinet.

The Fly 3 Bass stands 170mm high, 126mm wide and 102mm deep, and pulls off the Brit-style retro combo vibe with aplomb. A major reason for this is the grey metal grille that protects a custom three-inch Vanke speaker, and the overall look is a winner. Four controls sit on the top-mounted grey panel, with gain and volume flanking compression and an EQ dial that goes from bright and punchy to warmer scooped mids as you turn clockwise. An overdrive channel is accessible via the OD button – the gain control adjusts the distortion intensity – and there's a sub control, which is a harmonic generator that ghosts low frequency with your core tone.

Connectivity-wise, you get two mini jacks, a line in for your MP3 player or computer and a speaker-emulated headphone out that can be used for recording.

The Stereo Pack includes a 6.5-volt PSU (normally £12.99) and Fly 103 speaker cabinet – the same dimensions and driver as the F3B – with an in-built RJ12 speaker cable, which connects via telecoms-type RJ12 6P6C socket on the back of the F3B. This both doubles the volume and creates a stereo system, which is especially handy for audio monitoring.

If you're expecting a tinny, toy-like tone then think again, as your bass will sound well realised and convincing

In use

If you're expecting a tinny, toy-like tone, think again, as your bass, whether active or passive, will sound well realised and convincing. We were pleasantly surprised, especially as this little beast handles a low B string! Seriously. Blackstar hasn't made the F3B sound extra bright to compensate for downsizing, and the sub control induces proper tonal thickening, although active axes with a bass control render it an either/or option and the further clockwise you get on the EQ dial, the less you need. The EQ provides plenty of practical variations with brighter, punchier offerings from centre to zero on the dial and smoother, warmer sounds towards 10. You don't get serious rumbling lows, even by maxing the sub control, but to be frank, you'd be crazy to expect to. Compression is well attenuated, evening out spikes in your playing without sucking out the life, and inducing a little more presence. The overdrive offering is also decent, with lower gain levels adding some grit to the edge of your note and more excessive settings unleashing enjoyably spikey mayhem. Add to this audio playback that's clean and loud, plus top-notch headphone sounds courtesy of the speaker emulation and you've got a seriously good piece of kit.

Guitar & Bass VERDICT

+ Produces a remarkably good bass sound from a tiny, featherlight package
+ Ultra-portable and superb value for money
+ Looks good and is easy to use
+ Works well solely as a good-quality audio monitor

- Doesn't produce deep, rumbling lows but that's an unfair expectation

A top-notch mini bass stack that sorts out all your home practising needs in one fell swoop without breaking the bank

9/10

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

While there's nothing in the F3B's price range, there are some excellent options if you're prepared to invest a little more cash, such as the 60-watt **Markbass Micromark 801** at **£369** and the **PJB Double Four £379**. **Ashdown**'s 75-watt **B-Social £599** boasts wireless and Bluetooth connectivity.

KEY FEATURES

Blackstar Fly 3 Bass Stereo Pack

- **PRICE** £79 (Fly 3 Bass £49, including AA batteries)
- **DESCRIPTION** 6W twin-channel (clean and distortion) stereo desktop mini amp system. Moulded ABS cabinets with one 3" Vanke speaker in each
- **CONNECTIONS** F3B: input jack socket, MP3/line in and emulated out/headphones mini jacks, RJ12 6P6C extension-speaker out. Battery (6x AA) or mains power (6V Fly PSU provided in Stereo Pack, £12.99 if bought separately). F103: in-built RJ12 speaker-extension cable
- **CONTROLS** Gain, EQ, compression, volume, OD (distortion) on/off switch, sub control
- **DIMENSIONS** 170mmx126mmx102mm
- **WEIGHT** F3B: 0.75kg/1.65lbs F103: 0.64kg/1.42lbs
- **CONTACT** Blackstar Amplification 01604 817817 **www.blackstaramps.com**

Six of the best

Whether you're doing it for a giggle or looking to set up a second income, if you're a guitarist in a function band, you need to take care of the essentials...

Fender Blues Junior III

PRICE £509 **CONTACT** www.fender.com

Function bands very rarely come with their own roadie – or soundman, or driver, or even complementary sandwiches. So, as with printing out business cards, setting up PAs and lighting, and politely prising a bridesmaid's cake-covered talons from your iPod's scroll wheel, carrying gear is down to you. Fender's Blues Junior has been excelling at small- to medium-sized gigs since it debuted over two decades ago, and the current MkIII incarnation, with its 15 watts, twin channels, master volume and Eminence Lightning Bolt is a portable 14kg, is supremely versatile, takes pedals like a champ (not a Fender Champ) and has a great reverb.

For value for money, ease of use and versatility, we'd recommend you begin by auditioning the Line 6 M9 – with 100 effects accessible three at a time

Allianz Musical Insurance

PRICE Online quote **CONTACT** www.allianzmusicalinsurance.co.uk

As a professional performer, you also need to take the subject of insurance very seriously – and not just insurance for your gear, but also Public Liability Insurance (which is protection against claims that may arise if someone is injured while you're using your equipment). *G&B* recommends Allianz, the UK market leader in the field, which has covered 100,000 UK musicians with its tailor-made policies. Be sure to check the details of your policy to ensure you're covered for damage in transit, for unattended vehicle cover and whether you're covered if your instruments are taken or damaged while left unattended.

PAT testing

PRICE Varies **CONTACT** Your local electrician

Okay, so it ranks some way down the list behind breaking into the riff to *Play That Funky Music White Boy* in terms of exciting things to do in your covers band, but the fact is, you need to have your electrical equipment certified as fit for use by a qualified electrician – this is a Portable Appliance Test (PAT). If you don't do this, a venue has the right to cancel your performance if your equipment is deemed unsafe for public use, and there are plenty who insist upon it. Thankfully, PAT testing is a relatively quick process, and shouldn't cost you too much, either, with a fee of less than £10 per item a reasonable benchmark.

Line 6 M9

PRICE £330 **CONTACT** www.line6.com

The quandary for many a function-band guitarist boils down to the luxury of bringing along separate effects pedals which few ears in the crowd will appreciate the nuances of versus the efficacy of buying a multi-effects unit with a decent approximation of all the sounds you could need, all in one place. For value for money, ease of use and versatility, we'd recommend you begin by auditioning the Line 6 M9 – with 100 effects accessible three at a time, and 24 available 'scenes' to cover any eventuality in your set, it's rugged, ergonomic and has a tuner, a looper and a tap-tempo facility.

Pedaltrain pedalboard

PRICE £44 (Metro 16) **CONTACT** www.pedaltrain.com

From the dinky Nano to the prog-rock-ready Novo 32, pedalboard expert Pedaltrain has the perfect range of products to keep your precious stompboxes safe from the hooves of drunken wedding guests while looking super-stylish and being easy to set up into the bargain. Our personal recommendation (unless you're an FX fiend on a par with The Edge) is the Metro 16, a portable three-tier design, which comes with a choice of soft or hardcase and plenty of hook-and-loop pedal fastener. It's big enough to house a selection of essential stompboxes, but small enough to tuck under your arm and take on public transport.

Audio-Technica ATM510 mic

PRICE £79 **CONTACT** www.audio-technica.com

As a guitarist covering a diverse set, you're going to need to help out on the singing front. For something to sing your BVs through, the traditional choice has been the hard-wearing and inexpensive Shure SM58 cardioid dynamic vocal microphone, and if you want to go with tradition, there's no doubt one of these will see you right. However, we've also been seriously impressed by Audio-Technica's ATM510 – a similarly priced contender, which performs slightly differently and has an internal shockmount system and an internal neodymium magnet. Plus, it has a grille designed to reduce plosives and sibilant sounds, which you'll inevitably produce as you crane your neck awkwardly to keep an eye on your chord changes, mid-vocal.

TONY BACON

Tony Bacon is an author and journalist who writes about musical instruments, musicians and music. His books include *The Ultimate Guitar Book*, *History Of The American Guitar* and *Sunburst*, and his latest is *The SG Guitar Book* (Backbeat)

RARE TREATS

There are two vital factors when it comes to the value of vintage guitars. **TONY BACON** explains what they are

What's it worth? Don't worry, I'm not pitching a quiz show in which Fern Britton interrogates vintage dealers about refinished Strats in exchange for holidays for one in Kalamazoo. What I'm getting at is the tricky subject of settling on a value for collectable items: guitars, old records, Ming vases, that sort of thing. There's a saying: "something is only ever worth what someone will pay for it". Like many clichés, there's some truth behind it. Let's dig a little deeper.

What you need is rarity and demand. Rarity alone is no use. Think about it – a one-off is the rarest anything can be. There's only one! But it's unlikely anyone else will want the triple-neck bouzouki/oud/kora you had handbuilt by that chap with a shed full of terrifying chisels. Rare as hell... and worth next to nothing.

Some musicians must look back and wonder why they didn't nest-egg a box of records. Take the little-known prog-inclined group Agincourt. They made one album, in 1970, pressed up on a private label. Now, an original copy is worth hundreds... and it's worth hundreds because plenty of collectors say it's worth hundreds. There's demand; there's rarity; you see? Apparently, it's also a decent record, but that's beside the point. Collectable records are rarely played. They're ticked off a list. Stamp collectors don't use their mint gems to send letters, do they?

Part of the reason guitar companies got into reissues was because they saw all the money being made from vintage guitars. There was a smidgen of rarity, a lot of demand, and during the 70s the idea of vintage took off. New seems crap; old must be good. That was the simplified equation. And then the makers thought, 'hmmm, all this money floating around for our old guitars... and we're not seeing any of it. Let's reissue vintage-style guitars!'. Maybe they thought of it as some kind of recompense for making the originals in the 50s and 60s and yet not benefitting from the piles of money that change hands for their old vintage collectables.

What you need is rarity and demand. Rarity alone is no use

It's like Bill Weasley tried to explain to Harry Potter. "To a goblin," Bill said, "the rightful and true master of any object is the maker, not the purchaser. All goblin-made objects are, in goblin eyes, rightfully theirs. They consider our habit of keeping goblin-made objects, passing them from wizard to wizard without further payment, little more than theft." There's been a scheme in Britain since 2006 called the Artist's Resale Right, that aims to pay a royalty to artists (of the painting and sculpting stripe) each time one of their works is resold through auction houses, dealers and so on. Perhaps there should be a similar scheme for guitar makers whose instruments become high-value collectables.

I asked Billy Gibbons once how he felt about the crazy value some people put on guitars, and specifically original Bursts. He rephrased the saying for me: "I think it's reasonable to say it's whatever one is willing to pay – because of the limited number of Sunbursts, and because across the board, they all sound great." I reminded Billy he'd paid about $300 for his wonderful Pearly Gates in 1968, and that today, you need only add zeroes to taste. "They've become badges of honour," Billy said, "or badges of legitimacy. To see one, even if it's hanging under glass, you know you're in the presence of someone who has a deep appreciation of the finest of the fine." Isn't it wrong to put them under glass?

"These things were made to be played," he said with a Texan chuckle. "They were not thought of as classic instruments. They were made to make loud, irritating sounds. That's my view."

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IN ASSOCIATION WITH Reverb

Vintage TIME MACHINES

1961 GIBSON LES PAUL CUSTOM

In a new series, *G&B* goes guitar shopping on Reverb.com, and we might just have blown the whole budget already...

VITAL STATISTICS

Gibson Les Paul Custom

- **PRICE** £6,995
- **YEAR** 1961
- **TYPE** Solidbody electric guitar, made in Kalamazoo, MI
- **BUILD** Mahogany body finished in Polaris White with new overspray
- **REVERB SELLER** Atoyboy Guitars Reverb.com/atoyboy
- **SEE MORE** Reverb.com/UK

Much as the mid-1960s were a 'transitional era' for Fender, the first years of that decade saw Gibson ring the changes, too. Those changes were seen most vividly in the shape of the total redesign of the Les Paul into what we know now as the SG. As the story goes, by the end of the 50s, interest in Gibson's now-iconic 'Burst was waning and the firm sought to update its shape with sharper edges and a thinner, lighter body that would compete more directly with Fender's designs.

Gibson updated the Les Paul with sharper edges and a thinner body

Between 1961 and 1963, the SG was marketed as the 'Les Paul' (supposedly to the chagrin of the man himself) before being given its own title. When this design change occurred, Gibson didn't just update the Les Paul Standard, but rather applied the new body shape to the entire line-up – from the spartan Les Paul Junior all the way up to the luxurious Les Paul Custom, the guitar we're examining here.

Like the 50s Les Paul Custom 'Black Beauty', the SG-styled Custom featured a trio of humbucker pickups, rectangular inlays and the 'split diamond' headstock inlay. Rather than the distinct black-on-black finish, the SG Custom sported a slick Polaris White.

This particular SG/Les Paul Custom comes from Atoyboy Guitars in Cheltenham, and is a truly wonderful example of an instrument that's had some work done, yet still checks all the boxes on a collector's wishlist. According to the seller, it has been resprayed and refretted, but the work was carried out by none other than Tom Murphy, Gibson's go-to guy for replicating vintage finishes. Other appointments include the original, nicely patinaed 'sideways' Vibrola tailpiece and three original Patent Applied For humbuckers.

While the side-pull vibrato mechanism does not have the best reputation for stability or usability, visually at least, it's absolutely central to the iconic status this guitar has achieved over the years. Later 60s SGs would use a standard Maestro-style vibrato system, while examples from the 70s can be found with a Bigsby.

Unsurprisingly, the presence of the most celebrated and important pickups of all time is a major contributor to the value of this triple PAF-loaded SG. While this guitar certainly falls just shy of that coveted 'all-original' mantle, it remains a stunning vintage instrument with a story to tell.

Take a look at Atoyboy's entire Reverb shop for more examples of bona-fide vintage gems, all of which are ready to have another chapter of their story written.

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Vintage BENCH TEST

PRE-WAR STORY

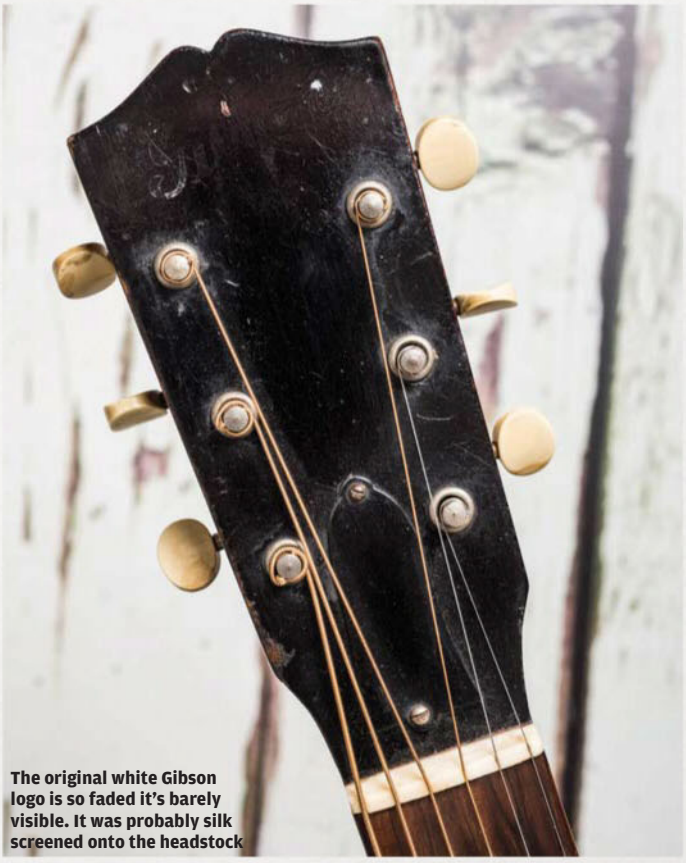
The late-30s was a golden era for American acoustics. This 1939 Gibson L-00 is no museum piece – and that's a compliment. **HUW PRICE** explains why...

Over this side of the pond, we may baulk at the suggestion that this Gibson L-00 might be a pre-World War II guitar, but from an American perspective it appears to be just that. Cranes Musical Instruments has determined it was made in 1939, but it's hard to say for sure.

We can be confident this example was made between 1936 and 1945, because L-00 production ceased in 1945 and back binding was introduced towards the end of 1936. It's difficult to decipher Gibson's numbering system, but referring to Joe Spann's book on Gibson Factory Order Numbers (FONs), the number on this guitar's neck block corresponds with a production batch of L-00s made at the end of 1937. It's unlikely to make any difference to collector's value whether it was made in '37 or '39. Inside the case, there's a very old photo of the guitar with its previous owner, showing a tailpiece fitted to the guitar along with a bar behind the bridge. Judging by the clothes the women are wearing, I'd suggest the picture was taken in the late-1930s or early 1940s. The bar was screwed onto the top and there are two telltale holes that have since been nicely filled and lacquered over. Three tailpiece screw holes have also been filled and lacquered at the tail.

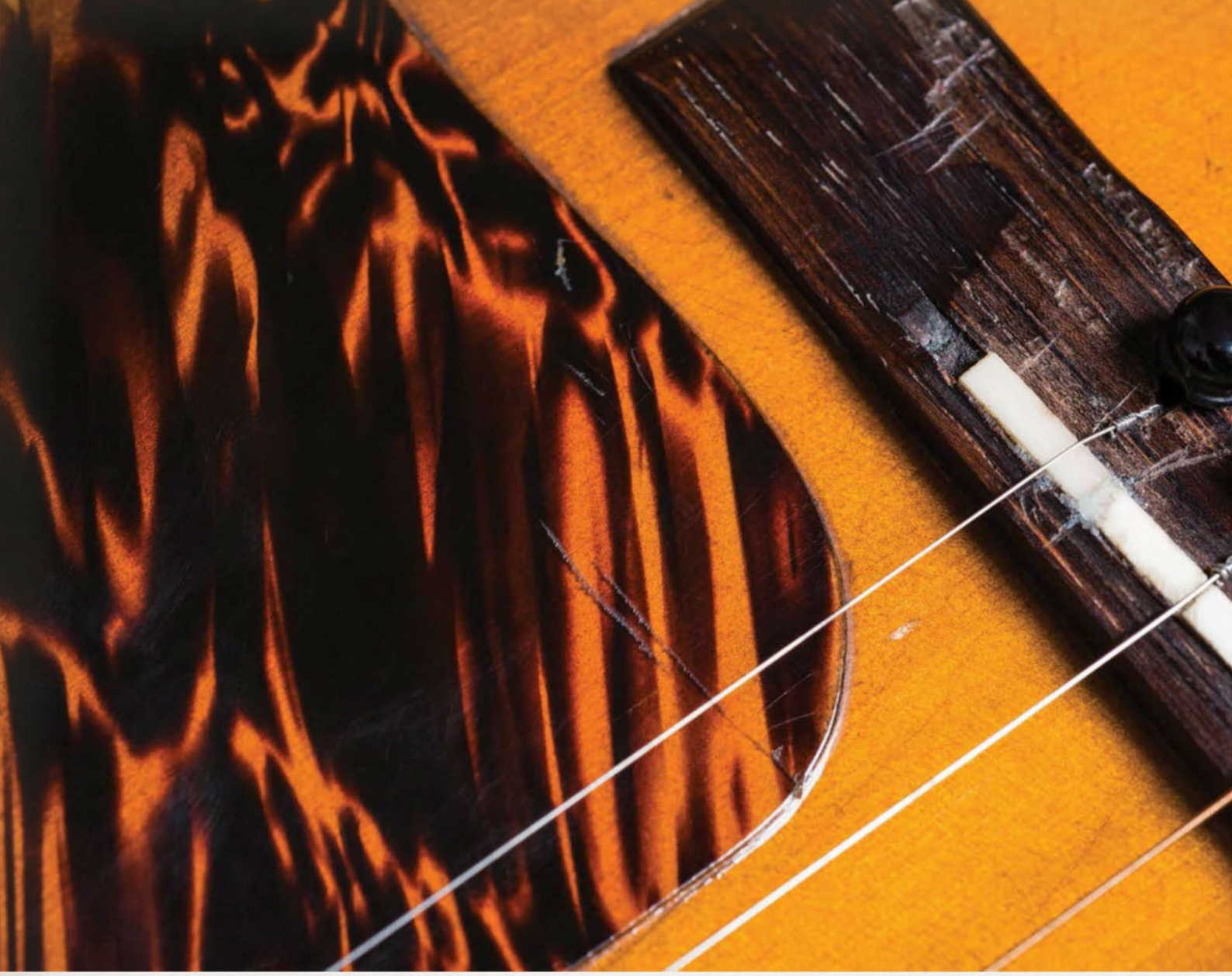
The finish has a gorgeous patina, the 'board is clean and divot-free, and there are no nasty cracks

In order to lower the action and create a sufficient break angle, the Brazilian rosewood bridge has been shaved down and tapered at the back. Unfortunately, the work was done crudely: the saddle barely protrudes above the bridge and the >



The original white Gibson logo is so faded it's barely visible. It was probably silk screened onto the headstock

This picture of a previous owner was found inside the case



KEY FEATURES

1939 Gibson L-00

- **PRICE** £3,000
- **DESCRIPTION** All-solid acoustic guitar with spruce top, mahogany back and sides, mahogany neck with stacked heel, Brazilian rosewood bridge and fingerboard, three-on-a-plate open-gear tuners, made in the USA
- **SCALE LENGTH** 628mm/24.75"
- **NECK WIDTH** 45mm at nut, 56mm at 12th fret
- **NECK DEPTH** 23mm at first fret, 25mm at ninth fret
- **STRING SPACING** 39mm at nut, 60mm at bridge
- **WEIGHT** 3.5lbs/1.6kg
- **FINISH** Tobacco Sunburst
- **CONTACT** Cranes Music 02920 398215 **www.cranes.co.uk**

Above **These old pickguards often shrink, causing cracks in the top as a result. This one has barely shrunk at all and it's in fine shape**
Opposite page, top **Just in case you were in any doubt, this old Gibson pre-dates the Nashville and Memphis factories. Note how the back braces are carved thin and tall**
Bottom **The back of the neck has been stripped and refinished. Gibson probably figured it could get away with a stacked heel, because it wouldn't have been seen through the original dark finish**

string grooves have been cut so deep, it's more like a nut than a saddle. It's a shame, because in all other respects this L-00 has survived into its seventh decade fairly unscathed. The body finish has a gorgeous patina, the fingerboard is clean and divot-free, and there are no nasty cracks in the body.

The neck is a different story. It seems that the finish was stripped from the back of the neck, presumably because it was worn and somebody decided to have it re-lacquered. Rather than match the neck colour to the body, as it had looked when new, clear lacquer was used and the original tobacco-brown lacquer on the rear of the headstock was sanded to create a faux stinger.

Although it may have got there by nefarious means, this old guitar plays astonishingly well

The lighter finish reveals a stacked heel, and the wood at the heel's sides has sanding scratches across the grain, suggesting whoever stripped the neck had begun to lose patience, and possibly the will to live, by that point. Many of us will sympathise.

The back of the headstock has two interesting features. A plugged screw hole is evidence of a long-departed strap button, and it can be seen from the old photograph that's exactly how the previous owner hung it. Just below the plug, there's a miniscule 'Made In The USA' stamp, which, apparently, Gibson applied to guitars destined for export to Canada.

The tuners appear to be original, because there is no evidence of other tuners having been fitted under the plate, and they match photos of other Gibson acoustics from this era. They also work surprisingly well and hold their tuning. The ebony bridge pins also look original, along with the strap pin and the gorgeous fire-stripe scratchplate, which has barely shrunk at all. However, the original nut was most likely ebony and, although it's long gone, the bone replacement looks the part and is cut properly. The guitar comes with a very old case that's in reasonable condition structurally and a very good fit for the L-00.

In use

Although it may have got there by nefarious means, this old guitar plays astonishingly well. The action can be described as medium-low and the frets have ample life left. There are no buzzes, rattles >

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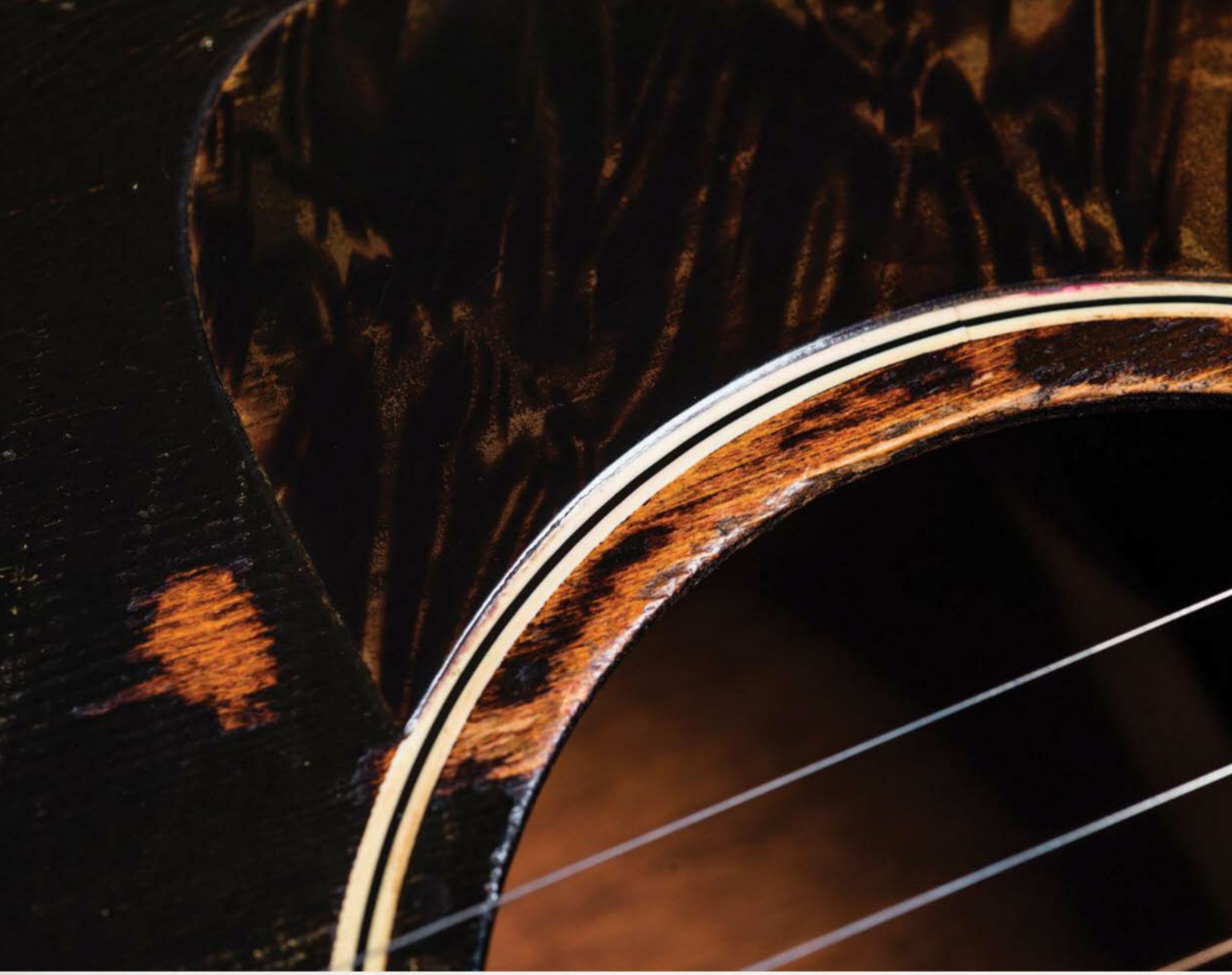

Above **The play wear is a sign of a guitar that has been well played and probably well loved. It looks super-cool, too**
Opposite page, top **You can see how the bridge top has been shaved right down to lower the action. Although it plays great and sounds fantastic, a neck reset and a taller saddle would probably make this L-00 even better**
Middle **Check out that old photo again and you'll see the strap going across to the headstock. Here, you can see a plugged strap button screw hole. Underneath is a 'Made In The USA' stamp that sources suggest Gibson used on guitars destined for Canada**
Bottom **The neck was stripped, but the back of the headstock was left original and a 'stinger' created. The tuners look as if they might be original, although a few of the original flat-head screws are missing**

or choke outs, and the only vintage signifier is the neck's rounded hand-filling fullness. As with Gibson's fat 50s necks, this one is supremely comfortable and the slightly wider-than-usual string spacing should suit pickers and strummers alike.

The tone is quite unlike that of an equivalent-sized Martin from this era. Where Martins can have a delicate and ethereal quality, the old Gibson is a punchier and more exuberant instrument. With impressive projection, the L-00 combines surprising bass power and depth with a forceful midrange and a clear but sweet treble.

The tone has a dry intimacy and such an immediate touch response that you can't help but feel connected

Like many featherweight pre-war acoustics, the tone has a dry intimacy and such an immediate touch response that you can't help but feel connected with the instrument. Blues-y picking and bottleneck are the obvious places to start, but you'll soon discover you can play Travis-style, country rhythm and even bluegrass.

The L-00 is suited equally well to fingerpicking and strumming. Far from being a retro curiosity, you can bash out rockabilly rhythms or 60s-era pop tunes. You can even conjure up that early 60s British folky picker vibe, and the balanced response and lack of boominess would make this an outstanding guitar for recording.

Ultimately, the tone is so evocative and distinctive that playing this L-00 almost transports you to another place and time. In a sense, that's what's so compelling about really good vintage guitars. You can circumvent all that futile stress about which op-amp chip or NOS power valves will make you sound like an authentic Texas blues virtuoso, or which M69 rings and lightweight tailpiece will make you sound like a 70s rock god. You could probably put a set of Elixir Nanowebs on this Gibson L-00 and still taste Oklahoma dust in your mouth every time you play an E chord.

Guitars of this age rarely come without some playability or originality issues. When they are flawless, they tend to be priced accordingly, so taking on one that is perfectly playable, but also a viable candidate for sympathetic restoration in the longer term, can be a good option. It gets you a serious vintage acoustic at a lower price point and you can spread the cost as you enjoy playing it and the process of making it right. Somebody really needs to adopt this baby.

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Vintage PRIVATE COLLECTION

SKIN DEEP

As a member of Britpop band Cast, who also works with Led Zeppelin legend Robert Plant, Liam 'Skin' Tyson has built up quite a guitar collection. **LARS MULLEN** takes a look...

"It's full-on at the moment, as I'm back-to-back touring and recording with Cast and the Sensational Space Shifters with Robert Plant, who I've been working with since 2005," explains Liam 'Skin' Tyson, guitarist with the Liverpudlian Britpop act and former Led Zeppelin legend's bandmate. "My guitar trunk with Robert is pretty full, with around 18 guitars, while Cast calls for about seven or eight, which I use in both bands.

"More than once, I've had to think in which part of the world some are stored, so I've had to double up on quite a few, like my '72 Gibson Les Paul Signature for example.

"That guitar has been one of my favourite electric guitars for both bands for a long time. When the Sensational Space Shifters toured the Deep South of the USA in the Spring, we played some of the big venues and some places that nobody had ever played before, and I was really pleased when I found another from the same year, also in Tobacco Sunburst.

"I love the way the switching offers so many great sounds. I can play out of phase, or sound like a Strat, or rock up a little, but not quite as much as a Les Paul, and the necks are so comfortable. It was quite a find, as very few were produced around that time in this finish – I believe only three in '70, moving up to a mere 75 samples in '72."

While Skin is partial to a big semi-acoustic, he's also often seen playing many of his handsome solid-bodied guitars. "My faithful '72 Strat is always close at hand for live and studio work," he says. "I've had it for about 20 years now. The distressed look is purely natural after a life of hard gigging, with me travelling literally around the world. While it was one of my number ones in Cast, I now use it mainly with Robert, so I've acquired a few more Strats for Cast. I'm not that critical about rosewood or maple fingerboards, it's whatever sounds good at the time, really.

"My faithful '72 Strat is always close at hand for live and studio work. I've had it for about 20 years"

"There's also a call for decent electric 12-strings in my collection, and my Candy Apple Red Fender Electric XII is perfect. A pal found it for me in Nashville. I've used it a lot during the three years I've owned it; it's ideal if the Sensational Space Shifters do Led Zeppelin's *Thank You*, for example. I have to carry enough guitars for all the songs we >

Above **Candy Apple Red Fender Electric XII (left), 1972 Fender Strat**
Opposite page, top left **Skin with his three-quarter size Gibson LG-2**
Bottom left **Body detail on naturally distressed '72 Strat**
Top right **1972 Gibson Les Paul Signature**
Middle right **Two of the Strats Skin uses with Cast**
Bottom right **Gibson SG Special**

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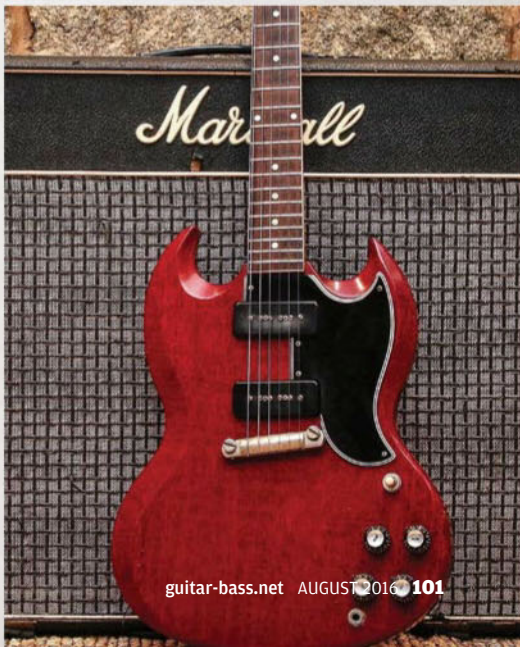
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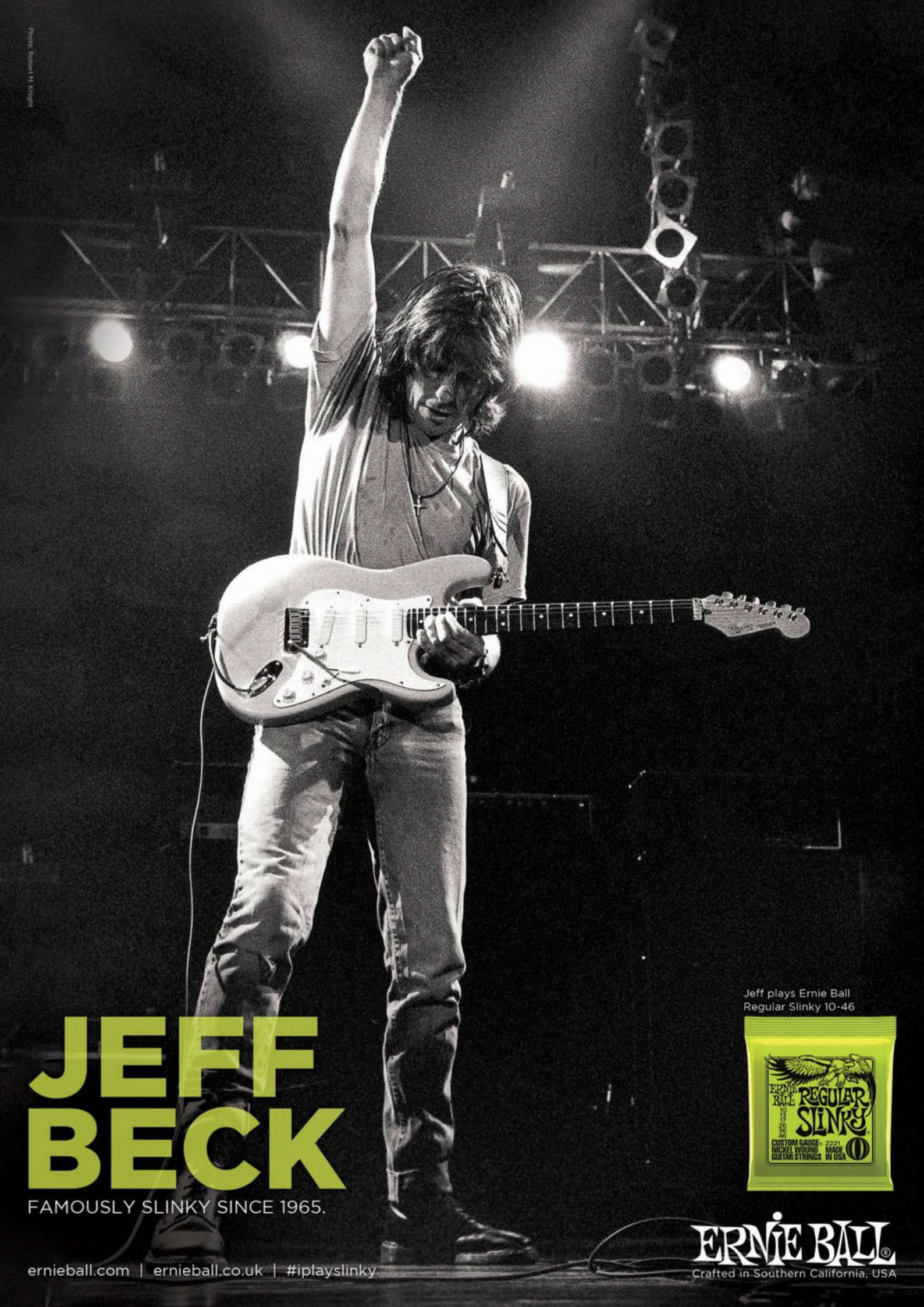
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cover, although if Robert decides to do a Led Zep song, I won't do a Jimmy solo, it's always a different arrangement to the original. If we play *Whole Lotta Love*, it'll have the same riff of course, but it will be a different arrangement.

"In the early days of Cast, before we had any advance from the record companies, I just had a Gibson ES-335 and a Goldtop. I couldn't really decide which was better for the band's sound, a guitar loaded with humbuckers or single coils. Luckily enough, I had the chance to try out some amazing alternatives, as the band had access to John Entwistle's private guitar army – needless to say, I was in guitar heaven. He had them all. I was there playing guitars once owned by so many great players, from The Everly Brothers to Jimi Hendrix.

"A '72 Tele Custom was one of the first of several guitars I bought when Cast were signed. It pairs up nicely with my custom '52 Relic reissue, which I bought at the Fender Custom Shop. I actually cleaned this one up a bit, as I thought it was a little too distressed. It's darker sounding, but I've grown to like it a lot. Again, it was a case of doubling up on the guitars, as I was using the '72 in both bands, so they are investments for the work I'm doing.

"If Robert decides to do a Led Zep song, I won't do a Jimmy solo, it's always a different arrangement"

"The output from a Tele is ideal for so many situations, but if I need to beef it up a little I'll use my SG Special. I've always wanted an SG after seeing Robby Krieger of The Doors with one. Mine is a '61 model in glorious Cherry Red, which I bought in Chicago last year. I used it the same evening as I bought it with Robert, and I also recorded with it on the new Cast album, *Kicking Up The Dust*. I'll always know it's mine, as someone in the USA etched their driving licence number on the back."

The Sensational Space Shifters are renowned for a twin-guitar mix and their slant on authentic-sounding traditional blues guitar, as Skin explains: >

Above **1972 Fender Tele Custom (left), Fender Custom '52 Relic Tele**

Top left **Gibson Robot Les Paul Studio (left), Gibson Les Paul '50s Tribute**
Top right **Skin's trio of Les Paul Goldtops**
Bottom left **Martin Heritage (left), Gibson J-35**
Bottom right **Gibson J-45, Skin's number-one acoustic (left), early Gretsch archtop**

"Justin Adams and myself work really well on stage. He has a nice old '52 Goldtop with P-90s and a trapeze tailpiece. When we do the bluesy walk-up to *Whole Lotta Love* and he's playing by himself with just Robert, you can really hear the early days of Memphis in that guitar. For a bigger sound picture, both live and in the studio, we generally use different guitars between us, but we'll often go twin-lead with a pair of Goldtops.

"I have three Goldtops, all from the 90s. One's loaded with a pair of hot P-90s; it was another guitar I acquired when Cast got their record deal, and was my number one for ages, and I've got a pair of Heritage '57 reissues.

"I wince when I think back to how I treated one after a tantrum years ago. I was in the studio in the very early days of Cast, and the monitors were playing up. I got so annoyed that I jabbed one with the guitar and the headstock flew off. Back in the dressing room, I was so upset how I treated it, I threw it in the corner of the room, it bounced out of the window and landed in a crumpled heap in a car park two flights below. But it's fine now and plays and sounds really nice. I have a lot of respect for that guitar, which I use a lot on stage.

"As a studio guitar, my Gibson Robot Les Paul Studio works really well, with all the onboard electronics. I used it with Robert on the *Lullaby And... The Ceaseless Roar* album, and it looks nice in the limited Chameleon Fireburst finish."

"I have three Goldtops, all from the 90s. One's loaded with a pair of hot P-90s"

Before turning to a hoard of big-bodied acoustic guitars, Skin shows off a cool three-quarter size. "I love this little Gibson LG-2 three-quarter-scale acoustic," he says. "My young kids, Osian and Guto, used it at the Eisteddfod Yr Urdd Welsh music and poetry festival. Osian used it to play *Stairway To Heaven*, and Guto to play a Spanish classical piece.

"I have several big-bodied acoustics, and all are favourites that serve a purpose, including my Gibson J-35, which I used on an album called *Inside Outside* by the Belgian band Novastar. But I >

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Top left **1970s Martin 12-string (left) and modern Martin 12-string**
Top right **Gretsch G5265 (left), 60s Rickenbacker Electro lap-steel guitar**
Above **Sho-Bud Pro I pedal-steel guitar**

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must say my number one is a Gibson J-45. I call it Snappy, as the headstock has been snapped off more than once, but I have to say I wasn't responsible for any of them.

"I don't really have a favourite electric or acoustic guitar for writing. I've penned many songs with Robert from way back to '05 in his Strange Sensation band. He's always writing down lyrics, and often I just send him a track to work on. *Dancing In Heaven* is a fine example, which I wrote on my 70s Martin 12-string.

"I wrote *All The King's Horses* on my Martin Heritage six-string. It's actually lucky to have survived another of my guitar mishaps, although nothing to do with me this time, it was in the lap of the gods. The Sensational Space Shifters were onstage during a soundcheck at a festival in Philadelphia, when a freak gust of wind blew my guitar rack of 18 guitars off the stage. Luckily, it was the only one damaged, and the repair is hardly noticeable.

"I have several big-bodied acoustics. I'd say my number one is a Gibson J-45. I call it Snappy"

"My style incorporates the use of a lot of echo and repeats. On the Cast album, I used a pair of Echoplex machines in stereo. I heard a comment that it was like being chased by a ghost.

"I've been using Hiwatt rigs for years, it's the clean headroom that works for me, as I also use them for acoustic guitars, and they handle the low end really well from my Gretsch G5265 Jet Baritone. They're also ideal for my old 60s Rickenbacker Electro lap steel. I'm thinking of taking it on tour instead of my Sho-Bud Pro 1 pedal steel."

While both of Skin's current bands call for some adept fingerpicking techniques, a cherished old plectrum provides him with a fond reminder of his youth. "Like so many guitarists, Hank Marvin and Bert Weedon were huge influences for me," he recalls. "I still carry my Bert Weedon plectrum from the *Play In A Day* book in my wallet everywhere, just in case. It's like the original 'Pick Of Destiny'."

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All about... Stratocaster Pickups

Despite their relatively simple design, Fender's original Stratocaster pickups are still revered for their 'vintage' sonic properties. **HUW PRICE** explores their timeless magnetic attraction for guitar players

George Fullerton recalled that Fender built several types of pickup for Bill Carson to test out in the Stratocaster prototype and the ones that made it into production were those Carson thought "had the most hair on their chest". Carson also wanted four or five pickups on the Strat, but, fortunately, Leo had the good sense to veto that suggestion.

Compared to Filter'Trons, PAFs, P-90s and even Telecaster pickups, Fender's design for the Stratocaster's pickups was by far the simplest. They're about as stripped back as pickups can be – the only parts involved are two 'flats', six magnetic slugs and some magnet wire.

Given that there are so few variables, it's interesting to ponder why the tone of Stratocaster pickups varies so dramatically. Breaking one down into its individual components and examining manufacturing inconsistencies may provide some of the clues.

Flat work

Vulcanised fibreboard, aka Forbon and 'fish paper', was Fender's default substrate material for circuit boards and pickup flats. Since the magnetic slugs were of a consistent diameter, holes were made in both the top and bottom flat that were tight enough to hold position on the slugs through friction alone.

Initially, the fibreboard was black, but this changed to grey around March of 1964. Later in the 1970s, the grey got darker. It's very unlikely that the flats have any influence on tone, but the colour can be helpful when determining the age and provenance of vintage pickups.

I have never seen a pencil date on the base of a pre-CBS Strat pickup with black flat work. Fender started using a yellow date stamp when the grey bottoms appeared; however, this changed to a handwritten date around 1966 and, by the late-60s, Fender was using a black date stamp.

The height-adjustment screws were threaded into extended ears on the bottom flat. Vulcanised fibreboard is pretty tough, but occasionally, the threads strip out and the screws won't hold. If you grind up some fibreboard with sandpaper, you can mix it with Super Glue, fill the screw holes then re-drill. No guarantees, but it has worked for me.

Slugs and stagger

Until 1954, Telecaster bridge and neck pickups had slugs that were flush with the top flat, but Fender took a different approach for the Stratocaster. Presumably, this was an attempt to achieve better string-to-string balance – or at least appear to be doing so. Remember, Fender was competing against the DeArmond Dynasonic and the Gibson P-90 at the time, both of which had individually adjustable polepieces.

Fender's initial Strat stagger had the D slug higher than the G slug. This soon changed as players began using plain G strings and the G slug came up to more or less the same level as the D slug. This is the stagger we're most familiar with today, but consider that it was designed for the vintage-style 7.25-inch string radius. These days, a 9.5-inch radius is common even on vintage-style instruments, but pickup winders persist with the vintage stagger nevertheless.

Fender's design for the Stratocaster's pickups was about as stripped back as pickups can be

The '54 slugs also had a 0.2-inch diameter, which was wider than the later 0.192-inch slugs. According to Tim Mills of Bare Knuckle Pickups, the slug diameter narrowed once again in 1963. This coincided with the veneer fingerboards and the diameter became 0.187-inches. This resulted in "a more focused magnetic field under the string and subsequently a brighter, tighter tone compared to the rounder bottom end of the earlier 50s coils".

The magnetic alloy also changed from alnico 3 on the very earliest '54 Strats to alnico 5 from 1955 onwards. Alnico 5 continued to be used throughout the vintage era, but around 1974, Fender stopped using staggered slugs. Fender also flipped the polarity in 1959 to 1960, from north up to south up.

The early slugs also had hand-bevelled edges and it is generally assumed this was done to disguise the rough and uneven surface left by the sand casting. Later, Fender stopped bevelling and, according to Seymour Duncan, this had an effect on the magnetic field, as he explains: "The bevel causes the magnetic field to shoot out a little around the bevel area, but it results in a tapering of the field above that point. So, if you could, imagine the magnetic field shaped like the flame of a candle or a teardrop."

Magnet wire

Magnet wire with two types of insulation coatings – heavy formvar and plain enamel – was used during the vintage era. The 42 gauge stayed consistent throughout, with the change to plain enamel occurring in 1964.

The number of turns varied considerably. Since everything was done by hand, there was much variation, but the general trend was towards hotter windings from a 5.7k average in 1954 to 6.4k in 1963. Interestingly, Fender cooled down the coils in '59 – so if Stevie Ray Vaughan did indeed have 1959 pickups in his '63 Strat, they were hardly the hot-wound coils of popular imagination. If that's what you're after, Bare Knuckles' Tim Mills notes that: "I've found the hottest Fender coils appear from '62 to '64, with DC ranges of 5.6k right up to 6.5k-plus and never in any particular order. It's not uncommon to find the hottest coil of three fitted in the neck slot."

After plain enamel wire was adopted, Fender began using fewer winds, presumably in an attempt to cut costs. So the pickups of the early 70s sounded brighter and weaker than those of the early 60s.

The insulation layer doesn't have a sound, but its thickness is a factor. Plain enamel provides a thinner coating than heavy formvar, so two coils with identical DC readings will have different dimensions. The formvar coil will be fatter and it will sound different as a result.

Coil shape

Take a look at a bunch of vintage and modern Strat pickups, and you will notice that the extent to which the slugs protrude beyond the plastic covers varies a great deal. Assuming the slugs are all the same length, this indicates that the gap between the two flats must vary.

It follows that if two coils are wound to the same DC resistance onto two pickups with different flat spacing, the coils will have different shapes. The wide-spaced flats will have a tall and narrow coil and the narrow-spaced flats will have the wider coil.

Jason Lollar explains: "You can get quite a different tone out of a Strat pickup by making the coil a little bit shorter or a little bit taller. It makes a measurable difference. You can hear the difference in as little as a 32nd of an inch." Generally, a wider coil will sound fatter and thicker, but the treble may be softened. A taller coil can sound clearer, brighter and more defined.

Coil winding

Hand-winding doesn't mean actually winding coils by hand. It refers to the method of guiding the magnet wire onto the bobbin by hand, while machine-winding refers to automation of the wire guiding process. In both cases, machines are used to spin the bobbin. Machine-wound pickups tend to be more consistent and they're cheaper to manufacture, which is undoubtedly that's why Fender ceased hand-winding pickups after the CBS takeover, when it also changed to plain enamel wire with fewer windings. It's now generally accepted that hand-wound Strat pickups can have superior tone regardless of the insulation material.

When human hands are involved, there are two further variables to factor in – coil tension and winding style. Legendary Fender pickup winder Abigail Ybarra was considered to have such a knack for winding >

BUYER'S GUIDE

Now you have the list of ingredients, you can mix and match to make an informed choice about the type of set that will give you the Strat sounds of your dreams. Here are four of the best aftermarket options...

BARE KNUCKLE PAT PEND '63 VENEER BOARD SET £175

This set is based on the best examples of the Strat pickups Fender was making when the fingerboards changed from slab to veneer. The slugs became slightly narrower in diameter and the extra space on the bobbin allowed the coils to be wound a little hotter, to add beef to balance the narrow slug's extra brightness. These are scatter-wound by hand, with heavy formvar.

HOUSE OF TONE HOUSE SPECIAL S TYPE 1960 SET £155

The House Special S Type 1960 (HSST 60) set was conceived as an 'idealised' 1960 Strat tone, based on readings taken from several genuine examples. Components include 42 AWG heavy formvar wire and hand-bevelled alnico V magnets. We haven't heard any set that nails the pre-CBS slab 'board sound better than these.

KLEIN 1969 EPIC SERIES STRATOCASTER PICKUPS $240

Classic Strat tone can mean late-60s as well as pre-CBS, especially if you like Clapton, Gilmour and Hendrix. This set features grey baseplates, alnico 5 slugs and 'flash potted' 42 AWG plain enamel wire. Right-handed Hendrix fans can order left-handed pickups at no extra charge for the reversed stagger.

SHED '54S £180

Made with Shed's usual obsessive attention to vintage detail, this relic'd set is scatter-wound with heavy formvar and features alnico 3 magnets. A black wax formulation is used for potting and realistically aged round edge covers and slot-head screws come as standard.

great-sounding pickups, she was coaxed back out of retirement to make pickups for the Fender Custom Shop.

'Scatter winding' is a hand-winding method in which the magnet wire is loaded onto the bobbins in a more uneven and randomised manner. The wire layers are not as tightly packed, which lowers the distributed capacitance of the pickup. This opens up the treble response and shifts up the resonant peak to achieve a clearer and brighter tone.

Magnet strength

According to Jason Lollar, "the actual recipe for the metal has a huge impact on the tone. You can get an alnico 5 from one factory... and an alnico 5 from another factory, and there can be a huge difference in the sound.

"Then old Fender pickups... you're going to find that the power of the magnet is about 20 per cent less than if you took that magnet, put it on the magnetiser and charged it back up".

Pickup manufacturers often deliberately weaken magnets in an attempt to emulate vintage tone. Another approach is to use weaker grades, such as alnico 4 rather than alnico 5. Weaker magnets produce a softer treble response and exert less pull on the strings, so you may also notice a bit more sustain.

Potting

Potting refers to the practice of impregnating the coils with a substance that will solidify the magnet wire and prevent squealing. Fender has generally used wax, but some pickups were dipped in lacquer and set harder. Rock-solid coils can sound brittle and harsh.

Most potting discussions approach the subject in a binary way – potted or non-potted. This is an over-simplification, however, because skilled pickup makers will carefully control the potting process in order to achieve specific results.

If you play loud, or use high gain, you will probably benefit from having heavily potted pickups. Yet I've never encountered a really good-sounding pre-CBS Stratocaster pickup that wasn't microphonic (tap the top with a plectrum and you should be able to hear it through the amp).

So, the 'vintage tone secret' is to pot the coil sufficiently to provide some squeal resistance, but not to over-pot and kill the chime, shimmer and airiness that only a degree of microphony can bring.

Small differences such as slug height, the number of windings and the winding method all add up to create telltale sonic characteristics in Strat pickups

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Chord Clinic

Shifting familiar open chord shapes to different positions on the fretboard can create all sorts of interesting results and provide fresh songwriting inspiration. **ROD FOGG** serves up a movable musical feast...

Sometimes, the most fun you can have with a guitar is to simply grab a chord shape, slide it around to different places on the neck and see what happens...

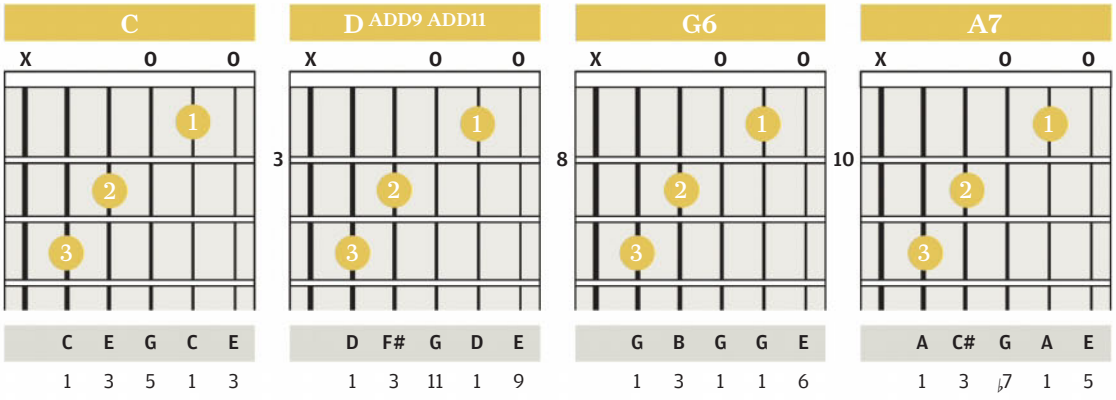
A short while ago, I was asked to help out a local singer with a demo recording of some of his original songs. One song in particular caught my ear, as the verse was made up entirely of the first two chords of figure 1. Thinking about it later, it was clear that he had come up with the chord sequence C followed by Dadd9add11 simply by sliding the C shape up and down the neck and finding something that worked. What is happening is the C major chord provides stability, or resolution, and the dissonant D chord provides tension, so we have alternating resolution and tension. Inspired by this, here we have an edition of Chord Clinic based entirely on the idea of shapes you can move around the fretboard.

You could experiment with the C shape in other positions, allowing the open E and G strings to continue to ring, but it also works particularly well up at the eighth and 10th frets, alternating between G6 and A7 chords.

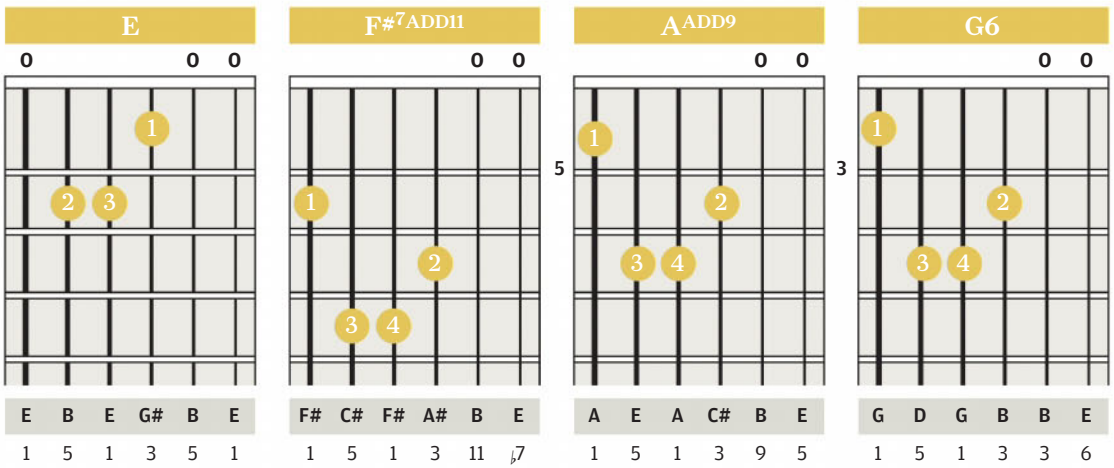
As you strum the chords in figure 1, use the tip of your third finger to mute the sixth string. Try strumming two chords to a bar, or play one bar of each. Arpeggios can work well, too.

You are no doubt familiar with the idea that the open E chord can be turned into a movable barre chord. Figures 2 and 3 take a look at what might happen when you hold down just the sixth string with your first finger instead of a complete barre and get busy with the sliding around. Figure 2 works well if you play the chords in the order they

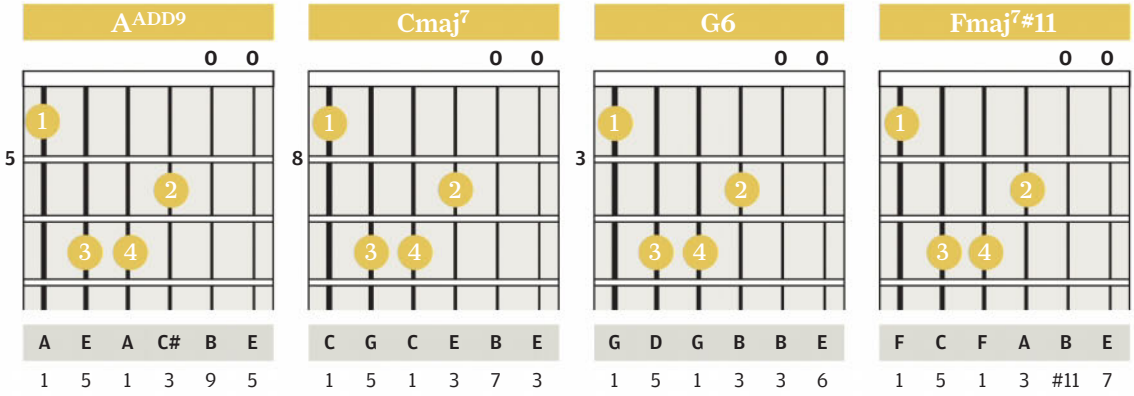
C moves (Fig 1)



Sliding with Es (Fig 2)



Moving under (Fig 3)



are written, but other arrangements are possible. Figure 3 repeats a couple of the chords, because, again, the idea is that you play them in the written order. This one is inspired by a real-life example you'll more than likely be familiar with, as it bears some similarities to the harmony from the chorus of the Red Hot Chili Peppers' *Under The Bridge*.

In each of the above examples, the same two notes (open E and B) are present in every chord. We sometimes call these drones, although another name for them is pedal notes. The idea of a pedal (no, nothing to do with effects pedals) originated when organists held down a long bass note using the pedal keyboard under their feet, while allowing harmony to change up above on the keyboard played with the hands. In time, the idea of a pedal has been modified so that it can now be in any register, high or low, and there can be more than one at a time, as you can see with the two open strings that sound throughout figures 2 and 3.

Continuing with the same theme, figure 4 reveals an unusually sparkly and chiming E chord at the 12th fret, a potentially useful D6/9 at the 10th fret, a surprising C#7#9 at the ninth fret and a slightly crunchy Badd11 at the seventh fret. Technically, the sharp nine over C# should be called D double sharp, but it is so much easier to just call it E. Try playing C#7#9, F#7add11, Aadd9, E. Alternatively, slot in the Badd11 instead of the Aadd9 and end on the high E shape. Food for thought...

Figure 5 grabs a more unusual movable chord shape to slide around, this time leaving the open G string as a pedal note in every chord. Jimi Hendrix used chords like these on the intro to *Castles Made Of Sand*, and they make a brief appearance in *Little Wing*, but the idea here is to enjoy the pedal note and to experiment with playing one or two chords per bar.

You need to be able to play 'thumb over' to hold down the notes on the sixth string. If you have really small hands, a nylon-string guitar or anything with a wide flat neck just leave out the bass note, as it is doubled on the fourth string in any case. Mute the A string >

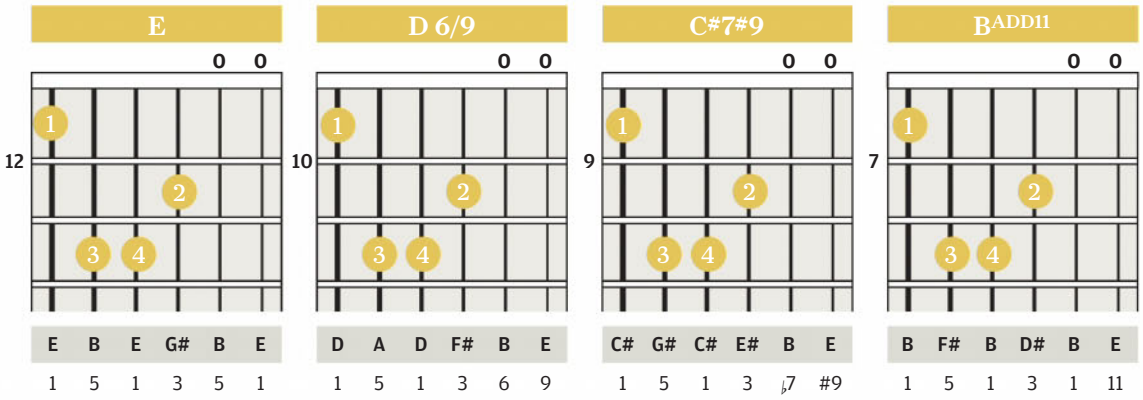
with your thumb or the tip of your third finger. A strange effect of moving shapes such as this around is the way the function of the open-string pedal changes from chord to chord, even though three of the four chords are 5add9s. In the first chord, the G is an added ninth, whereas in the second chord it is one of many roots. In the third chord, it is the sixth, and in the fourth shape, it is the fifth.

Incidentally, this shape also works well at the fifth fret, where it will produce an A9 chord, with the third omitted. Clearly, we have barely scraped the surface of what is possible here; we haven't tried moving any minor shapes around, so maybe you should give that a go next time you are in need of inspiration.

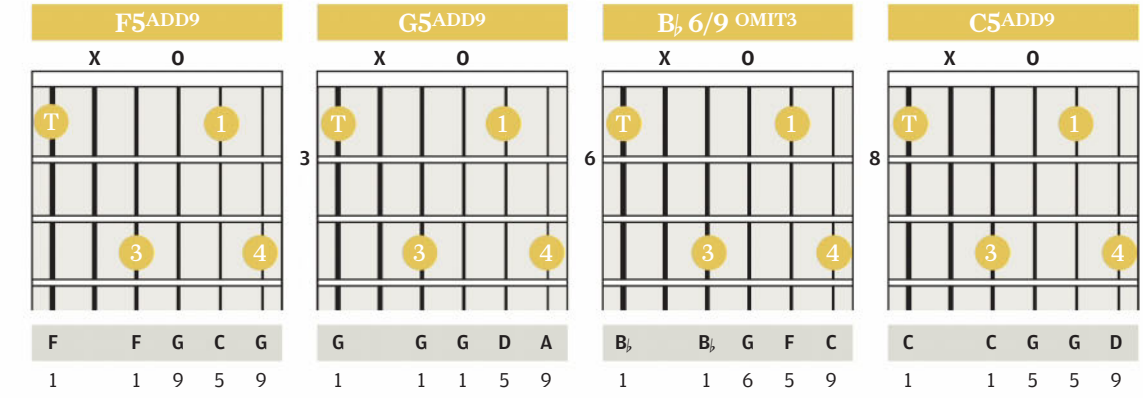
To finish, let's take a look at what might happen when you add pedal notes to 5 chords.

Figure 6 begins with a massive and strangely likeable E5 using all six strings of the guitar. A 5 chord played at the fifth fret produces a barren-sounding D6/9 because, unlike the similar example in figure 4, there is no third in the chord. At the third fret, a C5 chord produces a sweet C major seven when the open B and E strings are added. See you next month.

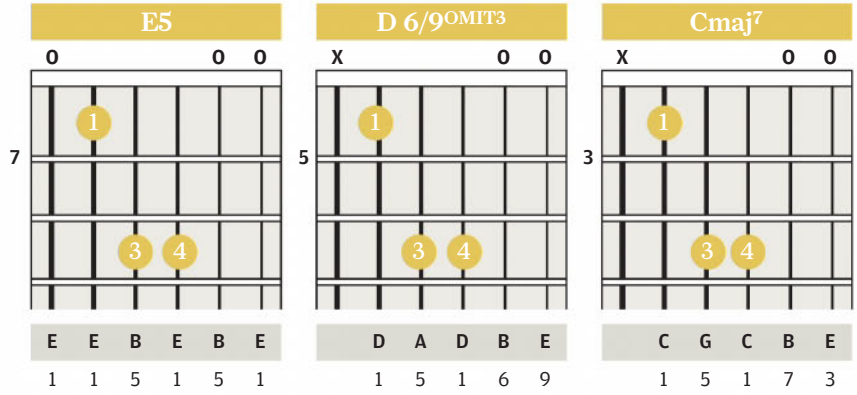
Higher options (Fig 4)



Moving castles (Fig 5)



A bunch of 5s (Fig 6)



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Fretbuzz

Your letters. This month: Getting started with recording, gigging vintage gear, Bigsby tricks and adjusting afterlength

LETTER OF THE MONTH

Open the DAW

Hello crew. This isn't about going for Letter Of The Month. Hopefully, it's to offer some useful feedback after taking your recent reader survey. I'm in my 60s, and I want to home record. I have Windows 7, broadband, some guitars and a couple of amps. I'm looking at things called 'DAWs', etc (loosely, think AC/DC, Led Zeppelin and the odd bit of acoustic and some singing). I'm currently somewhat baffled, but that will change, of course.

I look at a forum called MyLesPaul, which I enjoy, and the discussion about home recording is of brand names and model numbers, hassles such as crosstalk, latency issues(?) and so on, and I don't understand much of that. I do see quite a lot of repeat buying, signs of inaccurate purchasing in the first place. Some years ago, I bought an issue of a magazine called *Sound On Sound* and I don't think I understood a single word of it – possibly the magazine was aimed at studio professionals [try MusicTech instead – Ed].

Your item Six Of The Best, about a simple setup, is useful to me, and I can go from there. I also have a local music shop for strings, straps etc, but chatting with them to date somehow isn't hitting the spot for me. That may change – I'll ask a different person and I can always tour other dealers.

I can get a Focusrite and play into the computer and I can get a Cubase package to mess around with various amp options etc, so I understand. I've downloaded the PDF for my Yamaha THR10, which will increase my options with this piece of kit, but I haven't yet plugged into this to see what happens. Maybe I'll have the option of a decent blue-cone AC30 with a touch of Echoplex and slapback 'halo', and maybe I'll figure out how to get that into the Focusrite and the DAW direct, or maybe the Steinberg (Cubase) download from the THR will fight with everything else, maybe it would be redundant if I already had a DAW installed. I don't know. I haven't a clue!

That's where I am, others will be doing different things. The point is that your survey asked about an interest in recording/home recording, and I suspect there is plenty – there used to be reel-to-reel studios all over the place to rent for people recording demos, etc. These have disappeared, but I doubt that the interest has. It might be an idea to expand a little on your item, in particular making a video guide giving the 'how to' lowdown on recording a) an acoustic song and b) a multitracked piece with imported sounds, such as drums.

I'd guess that there's plenty of scope for these types of features somewhere in your magazine without crowding out the old favourites about choice guitars, mean players and new music, but I wouldn't for worlds tell you your job. The reality is that a small amount of kit in the right hands could put professionals out of a job. Just saying. The magazine is great, loaded cover-to-cover. Always a pleasure, thank you.

Geoffrey Allen, via email

***G&B** We know what you're saying, Geoffrey, and it's frustrating that the world of home recording can often seem so intimidating to the uninitiated that it puts people off recording music altogether. But get past this initial hump and it soon becomes clear that it is now easier and cheaper to begin recording your own music than ever; free versions of Digital Audio Workstations (DAWs) such as Cubase or Pro Tools (reviewed on p77) are supported by a wealth of helpful beginner's documentation and How To videos online. We'll think about your suggestions for features, but in the meantime, take things one step at a time and your perseverance will soon pay off.*

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ORANGE AMPLIFICATION

Vintage valves

What a strange and wonderful beast is the guitar enthusiast. From the start, I must admit to a terminal case of Guitar Acquisition Syndrome – but in my defence, as I've got older the number has declined as the quality has increased. I gig regularly, and vintage guitars are often admired, but I've noticed a different attitude to amps. I own several fine old amps; Marshalls, Fender, Vox, Watkins and my most frequently used and favourite weapons of choice are a pair of immaculate WEM MK1 Bass Dominators. Several people have expressed surprise that I risk such pristine 70s glories to the rigours of gigging, while ignoring an early 60s Gibson guitar stood next to them. Is it me, or is that just weird?

Ted, via email

***G&B** A good point, Ted – and perhaps it comes down to the notion that amps have more 'moving parts', and therefore, more can go wrong? But this stuff was built to last, and we say well done for letting it out of the house to be heard.*

Beat the Bigsby blues

After browsing through your *DIY Handbook* supplement and reading your Bigsby restringing tips, I thought I would draw attention to the excellent Vibramate Spoiler that I have fitted on my ESP's Bigsby. It makes restringing a breeze (particularly with locking tuners) and also keeps a straight string pull. Tuning is very stable, too. I got mine from the US via eBay... not sure if anyone imports them into the UK? I also have a Reverend Soft-Touch Spring fitted, which gives a much lighter feel. Love the mag, keep up the good work!

Dave Kirkpatrick, via email

***G&B** Any help with Bigsby restringing is greatly appreciated, Dave, so thanks for the tips. We were also impressed with the String-Thru Bigsby on Gretsch's recent Players Edition guitars – well worth a look for impatient wobble enthusiasts.*

Tailpieces and tone

Highly informative article by Huw Price about the 335 in a recent Vintage Bench Test. One thing intrigues me, though; he says that some players find that, with a trapeze tailpiece, there is less sustain and it is harder to bend the strings than with a stop tailpiece. In my experience, I find that shortening the afterlength of the string (the part between the bridge and the tailpiece) gives a tighter feel to the string and a snappier tone, while lengthening it gives a looser feel and

The distance between trapeze tailpiece and bridge affects tone, says reader Andrew Lines

a mellower tone. This is despite the fact that, obviously, the nut-to-bridge tension remains the same.

I know there will be guitar makers reading this shouting at the page saying it doesn't make any difference: well, they're entitled to their opinions! Some violin players adjust their tailpieces so that the note of the afterlength is in harmony with the open strings, so it's not just me!

As part of my MA research at London Metropolitan University, I constructed an archtop guitar with an adjustable tailpiece and recorded the results both sonically and visually. Moving the tailpiece right up to the bridge gave an almost Maccaferri-like tone, moving it further away made things a lot mellower. That being said, I've never done an A/B test with two 335s with different tailpieces; it would be interesting to read what others think.

Andrew Lines (Lines Guitars), via email

PS I've no intention of getting out more until I need to get a new anorak!

***G&B** Do any other guitar makers contest or back up Andrew's findings? We'd like to hear from you. Also, what kind of anorak material should Andrew choose? Is there an optimum hood design? So many questions...*

HAVE YOUR SAY! Write to us via snail mail, *Guitar & Bass, Anthem Publishing, Suite 6 Piccadilly House, London Road, Bath BA1 6PL* or email **guitarandbass@anthem-publishing.com.** Alternatively, get in touch via social media on Facebook or Twitter.

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Guitar & Bass

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

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• Patrick James Eggle • Motion Custom •
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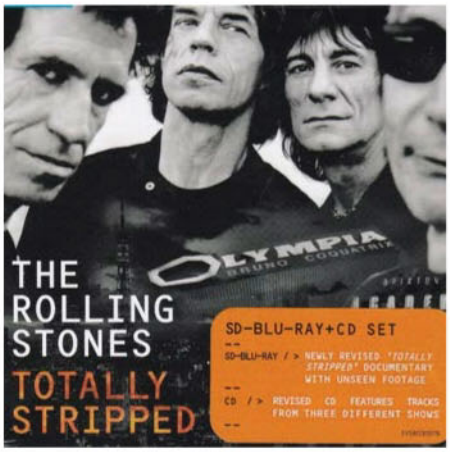
• J Rockett • Bad Cat and more...

VOL 27 NO 12
ON SALE
05 AUG

•Contents are subject to change

New music

We round up and rate a selection of this month's guitar-driven album releases and reissues



The Rolling Stones
TOTALLY STRIPPED

In 1995, The Stones had just completed their year-long *Voodoo Lounge* stadium tour, and, in the spirit of MTV's *Unplugged* concert series, decided to release an album featuring stripped-down versions of hits and covers. Some were live at more intimate venues, some were recorded in studios, and a documentary film accompanied the music. While the CD here has only one track in common with the original, it's the DVD documentary that's the highlight of this repackaged and updated version. There's still a range of electric archtop and solidbody guitars, pedal steel, horns, organ and sax among the acoustics, but the newly edited film conveys the band's enthusiasm for playing in a more musically dynamic and direct context, and reconfirms that these would still be great songs even if they were played on a kazoo. **CM**

7/10

TRY IF YOU LIKE *MTV Unplugged, The Band*

Rival Sons
HOLLOW BONES

A California cocktail with traces of Zeppelin, The Black Keys, Jack White, Queens Of The Stone Age and Pearl Jam, the latest creation from Rival Sons sees them fly the flag for 21st century classic rock with a pleasingly sleazy edge. *Hollow Bones* is filled with rocking blues-infused delights, dirty grooves and gritty desert fuzz and octave tones. The bittersweet vocal performance from Jay Buchanan, backed up by guitarist Scott Holiday's gnarly guitars, instantly conveys the electrifying energy that went into this album's performances. Dave Cobb's production is a joy – it sounds real and immediate but nothing is too bombastic. Everything has its place, and occupies it well, and with their colourful sonic touches and catchy riffs, Rival Sons are the perfect soundtrack for driving through those dusky summer nights. **TT**

9/10

TRY IF YOU LIKE *QOTSA, The Black Keys*

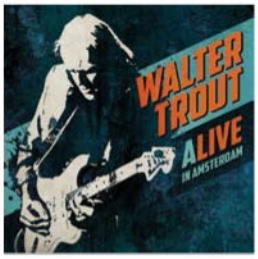
Bear's Den
RED EARTH & POURING RAIN

Bear's Den's second album sees the London band deviate from the heartfelt folk of their Ivor Novello-nominated debut, *Islands*. *Red Earth & Pouring Rain* is a foray into 70s classic-rock territory à la Bruce Springsteen and Fleetwood Mac. Grand, sugary production and reverb-splashed drums are the order of the day, but the record, cut at Rockfield Studios in Wales, is not without its emotive moments. Indeed, it's when Bear's Den return to the considered, patient songcraft that earned their debut comparisons to the likes of The National and Bon Iver that this follow-up shines brightest. The mid-album run of *Roses On A Breeze*, *New Jerusalem* and *Love Can't Stand Alone* is awash with refined quality, tasteful minimalist guitar playing and ghostly volume swells. Majestic stuff. **GW**

7/10

TRY IF YOU LIKE *Bruce Springsteen, The National*

Walter Trout
ALIVE IN AMSTERDAM

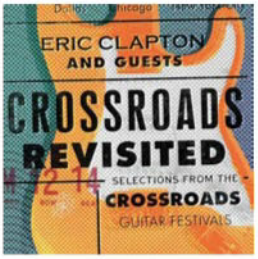


Recorded in Amsterdam last year on a tour that, in Trout's words, "was kind of triumphant", this 16-track set is an impressive feat. The full-throttle blues rock crosses into a range of genres – there's an explosive jam with his son Jon on *Rock Me Baby* and a touching dedication to BB King on *Say Goodbye To The Blues*; and when he takes the spotlight with some furious off-the-cuff lead work, you can really feel it. **CM**

7/10

TRY IF YOU LIKE *Jeff Healey, Gary Moore*

Eric Clapton And Guests
CROSSROADS REVISITED

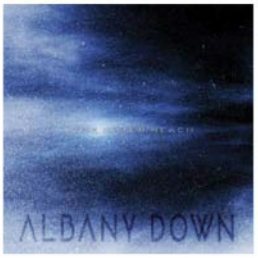


The Crossroads Guitar Festival, a charity extravaganza in aid of Clapton's Antiguan centre for addiction treatment, has been running since 1999. This three-CD showcase of highlights from the concerts is packed with performances from Eric's own pick of the world's superstar blues artists – and since royalties from sales benefit the centre, if this sounds remotely like your kind of listening, you should just buy it. **CM**

9/10

TRY IF YOU LIKE *Live blues-guitar music*

Albany Down
THE OUTER REACH



Albany Down blend familiar classic-rock influences with the contemporary blues riffing of bands such as The Black Keys on their third full-length outing. It's an album themed around the concept of overcoming adversity, with the huge, evocative lead single *Feeding The Flame* typifying that approach as it explores the theme of beating addiction. Guitarist Paul Turley turns in a formidable performance throughout a set that bristles with promise. **GW**

7/10

TRY IF YOU LIKE *Led Zeppelin, Whitesnake*

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Eleanor Jane

SCOTT HOLIDAY

"My Spinal Tap moment..."

Fresh from tearing up the Download Festival stage, the Rival Sons guitarist holds court on gear, influences and hand sanitiser

1 I couldn't live without my...
"I hopefully don't depend too hard on any piece of equipment; I like to think I could pick up anything and have fun with it."

2 In another life I would be...
"It's different now, because I'm so immersed in this world... I'd probably be making money off some other musicians! [laughs]"

3 The moment that started it all...
"When I was really young, I had an uncle that played a bit of guitar. He really wanted to influence me and brainwash me on rock 'n' roll – there was a time when all of our family were hanging out and he pulled me away from the family party and made me watch *The Song Remains The Same*. He had everything going through one of those old 120-watt stereos and he played it for me louder than any child should have to hear it. I loved how that felt."

4 The one that got away...
"I've gone through like a hundred guitars, probably. But one I specifically wish I wouldn't have got rid of, it's not ultra-valuable, but I had an original Starcaster in white. It was perfect, it was mint. I didn't really love how it sounded so much, it wasn't even the best player – but it was a perfect showroom one. I love the shape, and now I play a Fano in that shape that destroys it in tone and playability. But I wish I had kept that one, 'cause it was so collectible and cool."

5 My Spinal Tap moment...
"We have one every other night. But there have been some great moments on *big* shows – and I mean televised shows – where we've been handed guitars in the wrong tuning."

6 The best advice I've ever been given...
"Don't sell your publishing. I know that sounds really plain and simple, but that's really good advice. Don't sell your shit. Keep your publishing, keep the masters. They want to fuck you so bad, they want everything you have and that's the only way you're ever going to make money."

7 The first thing I play when I pick up a guitar...
"I don't really have specific songs that I'll play, the guitar will kind of call for it. Every guitar has got songs in it."

8 The most important thing on my rider...
"Hand sanitiser, which is sadly missing today."

9 My guiltiest musical pleasure...
"We don't really do guilty pleasures, we like music. We'll all agree that Cyndi Lauper record from the 80s was unbelievably brilliant, and well written and produced."

10 If I could learn to play one thing...
"Definitely a large portion of Django Reinhardt's catalogue. I study Joe Pass and flail horribly at it. [I'd like to] get into jazz guitar, because I was raised in such a different world. That's something I foresee for myself. Leaving this life, moving to the south of France and studying that until I get old and die."

Photo by Jordan Curtis Hughes

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